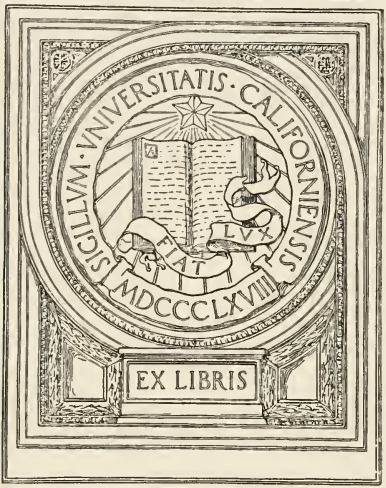
GIFT OF
Gladys Isaacson



THE MESSAGE
OF
ROBERT BROWNING

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THE MESSAGE
OF
ROBERT BROWNING

BY
A. AUSTIN FOSTER, M.A.

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GIFT OF
GLADYS TOMKINSON

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4248
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TO

MY WIFE

M27821

PREFACE

THE following short Studies are collected from the pages of the *Scottish Standard Bearer*, where they first appeared, and are published at the request of friends, some of whom are known to me only by correspondence, but whose words of kindly appreciation I deeply value.

The substance of the last chapter on Faith and Sight was, in the first instance, delivered as a lecture before the Aberdeen Diocesan Society.

A. A. F.

Bieldside, Aberdeen.

CONTENTS

PAGE

INTRODUCTORY 1

I

LIFE AND DEATH 19

Rabbi Ben Ezra

II

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SMALL DUTIES . . 39

The Boy and the Angel

III

THE TRAGEDY OF GENIUS 55

Andrea Del Sarto

IV

HIGH FAILURE AND LOW SUCCESS . . 71

A Grammarian's Funeral

CONTENTS

PAGE

V

IMPERFECTION 91
Cleon

VI

THE IMMORTALITY OF LOVE . . . 115
Evelyn Hope

VII

THE ETERNAL MOMENTS OF LIFE . . 131
The Statue and the Bust

VIII

THE HEAVENLY VISION 153
Abt Vogler

IX

THE COMING OF THE CHRIST . . . 173
Saul

X

FAITH AND SIGHT 203
A Death in the Desert

INDEX 241

INTRODUCTORY

INTRODUCTORY

Browning's attitude to the age in which he lived may be compared with that of the Hebrew Prophets, who, while they breathed the exalted atmosphere of noble ideals more or less to themselves apart, nevertheless touched in most real earnest the sluggish mass of life around them, stirring up slumbering consciences, disillusioning the self-satisfied, awakening dead souls to newness of life, and substituting for the heavy weight of a soul-destroying materialism a living faith in God and humanity,

and establishing on a firmer and more rational basis the innate nobleness and unbounded potentialities of human nature.

I

The Hebrew Prophet was a Man with a Message of arresting power, that touched life at close quarters, and pointed away from the poor failures of the past to the world of present opportunity and future possibility. It sounded the doom of the sinner who in his sin was satisfied, but hope eternal as the love of God to the man, however fallen, who would lay hold on heaven and try again.

Browning had just as emphatically a Message to deliver to the men and women of his age, and for that matter, as was also the case with the Hebrew Prophets, to all succeeding ages—a message of Life, of Hope, of Spiritual Realities; a message of the harmonies that issue from resolved discords, of the day-dawn of faith after the midnight of despair, of the beauty of righteousness after the unloveliness of sin, of the assurance of victory after the agony of defeat; a message that shall irradiate life, give courage to the faint-hearted, and sustain with a vision of glorious hope all storm-tossed, tried, and tempted souls.

II

Every real poet enters the lists of Life the avowed champion of Truth, to wage war against falsehood and error and all that degrades life and betrays character. He is a Sir Galahad, who has set out on a mighty quest — the Quest of Truth; who has staked his soul on the pursuit of the haunting Vision of Perfection. And Truth to Robert Browning was a diamond with many facets, each glinting forth its ray of brightness, each flashing out its portion of the whole message under the light of honest labour and unstinted research. For Browning had, without doubt,

learned the significance of the words of the Greatest Prophet of all, "He that *seeketh* findeth; and to him that *knocketh* it shall be opened." So he tells us in *Rabbi Ben Ezra* there is

> Here, work enough to watch
> The Master work, and catch
> Hints of the proper craft, tricks of the tool's true play.

And just as the smaller facets of the diamond may flash back the light in most piercing intensity, so may the many-sided elements of the Truth, as Browning understood it, be most clearly and sharply seen in such of his smaller poems as are to be found, for example, among

the *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, the *Men and Women*, and the *Dramatis Personæ*, which belong to the earlier portion of his work, and whose teaching is in the best sense of the word characteristic.

It is to some of these that we would direct attention with a view to extracting their dominant teaching, the light from one facet at a time, that we may apprehend to some extent the spirit of the great Poet-Prophet of the Victorian era, catch a glimpse of his heaven, tread the stones of his earth, and sit at his feet to learn his mighty lessons, the lessons of Truth in its application to Life.

III

By way of introduction to the poems, it may be helpful, at this point, to emphasise two conspicuous elements in the personality of the man Robert Browning.

His ROBUST MANLINESS may rightly have first claim upon our attention, and along with that his abhorrence of all shams and hypocrisies. Life flowed strongly and sanely through his veins. He was at times abrupt in his manner as in his poetry, but mawkish or unmanly never. To know life was his ambition—life in all its varied fashions, its ideals and its weak indifferences, its ambitions

and its grovelling meannesses, its successes and its failures, its heroes and its villains! So in his early days he wrote—

'Twas in my plan to look on real life,
The life all new to me; my theories
Were firm, so them left I, to look and learn
Mankind, its cares, hopes, fears, its woes and joys;
And, as I pondered on their ways, I sought
How best life's end might be attained—an end
Comprising every joy. I deeply mused.[1]

"The sea which spoke to Browning with most expressive utterances," writes Professor Dowden, "was always the sea of humanity." And Mr. Sharp tells us that when he first beheld London by night, "It seemed to him then more wonderful

[1] *Pauline.*

and appalling than all the host of stars. There was something ominous in that heavy pulsating breath: visible, in a waning and waxing of the tremulous, ruddy glow above the black enmassed leagues of masonry; audible, in the low inarticulate moaning borne eastward across the crests of Norwood. It was then and there that the tragic significance of life first dimly awed and appealed to his questioning spirit: that the rhythm of humanity first touched deeply in him a corresponding chord."

"Do you care for nature much?" he was once asked. "Yes, a great deal," was his reply, "but for human beings a great deal more." Hence

the cosmopolitan character of his mind, the large world in which he revelled and about which he wrote. He was in no sense afraid of men, nor was he satisfied to criticise them from a distance. He reverenced them, not so much for what they were, as for what they might become. He went near to them, and learned from them the tragedy of their joys and sorrows, and laid his strong and sympathetic hand on the world's palpitating heart to still the feverish beating, as a harpist softens with his touch the twanging of the harp-strings. And men were cheered by the very wholesomeness of his large-hearted personality. "Mr. Browning's

grasp of the hand gives a new value to life, revealing so much fervour and sincerity of nature," were the words of the wife of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Another highly characteristic quality of the man was his BUOYANT FAITH, by which he was enabled to rise above all reverses of fortune, and that bade him point men upwards to the bright heaven of increasing possibilities, and enable them

To see a good in evil, and a hope
In ill-success; to sympathise, be proud
Of their half-reasons, faint aspirings, dim
Struggles for truth, their poorest fallacies,
Their prejudice and fears and cares and doubts;
All with a touch of nobleness, despite
Their error, upward tending all though weak,
Like plants in mines which never saw the sun,

But dream of him, and guess where he may be,
And do their best to climb and get to him.[1]

O glorious faith of this most buoyant soul! Here was a faith that soared aloft into the boundless regions of the great unknown, beating back with the mighty stroke of its pinions the limitations of our frail humanity, seeking

No isles of the blest, no quiet seats of the just,
To rest in a golden grove, or to bask in a summer sky:

but only

The wages of going on, and not to die.[2]

Death had no terrors for such a

[1] *Paracelsus.* [2] Tennyson, *Wages.*

faith; it was but "the threshold of boundless Life."

"Death, death," wrote Browning once, referring to the pessimistic tone of much of the literature of his day, "it is this harping on death that I despise so much. In fiction, in poetry, French as well as English, and I am told in American also, in art and literature, the shadow of death, call it what you will, despair, negation, indifference, is upon us. But what fools who talk thus! Why, *amico mio*, you know as well as I, that death is life, just as our daily momentarily dying body is none the less alive, and ever recruiting new forces of existence. Without death, which is

our churchyardy, crapelike word for change, for growth, there could be no prolongation of that which we call life. Never say of me that I am dead."

The faith of *Paracelsus*, which he wrote while still a young man, was ever the faith of Robert Browning. In the vigour of youth, with life before him, and conscious of the divine challenge, he answers—

I go to prove my soul!
I see my way as birds their trackless way—
I shall arrive! what time, what circuit first,
I ask not: but unless God send His hail
Or blinding fire-balls, sleet or stifling snow,
In some time, His good time, I shall arrive:
He guides me and the bird. In His good time!

And in the end, after life's experiences,

sweet and bitter, with death's cold hand upon him, he still cries in most consummate trust—

> If I stoop
> Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
> It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
> Close to my breast; its splendour, soon or late,
> Will pierce the gloom: I shall emerge one day!

O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory?

I

LIFE AND DEATH

"RABBI BEN EZRA"

Browning differs from the majority of poets in the selection of his characters. He seldom chooses the very great ones of earth to body forth his message, those warriors and heroes whom the world has placed in the front rank of her elect souls. We hear little in Browning of such heroes as Alexander and Cæsar and Napoleon, before whose conspicuous genius men have been taught to bend the knee. But we do hear from him a great deal of those characters whom the

world had learned to ridicule and despise, whom it had brushed aside from the pavement of its respectability and banned from its social atmosphere. The world was pleased to call such souls as these failures, beyond the pale of its forgiveness, condemned to the outer darkness of its most serious displeasure. To these human derelicts Browning drew near, touched them with his mighty compassion, fired them with his brilliant hope, cleared their obscured vision, held them up to themselves and showed them through the darkness the rising of the day-star of a new life. The derelict had still a value to him. With fires relighted, machinery restarted,

the chart rescanned, a wise hand at the rudder, the port might still be made.

Now, one of the most despised of earth's many children for centuries, ever since the appalling crime of Calvary, was the Jew. The curse he claimed, as with ribald gesture and flouting tongue he hurled reproaches at the Son of God, had most assuredly found him out, and had haunted him down the ages. With no country to call his own, he, the most patriotic of men, was driven from pillar to post up and down the earth, the prey of every greedy plunderer, the butt of men's foulest ribaldry. Even Shakespeare's Shylock had elements of goodness, despite

the horror of his accursed greed and bitter jealousy, that were lacking in the popular estimate of such as he. Truly the Jew was of all men most pitiable; he had become in his turn "The despised and rejected of men."

And it is to Browning's eternal credit that in placing the utterance of his maturest wisdom in the mouth of Rabbi Ben Ezra, he has dared to reinstate the race of the Jewish people once more in the ranks of the respectable, and to claim for them the wider atmosphere of a more tolerant charity.

I

In *Rabbi Ben Ezra* we have a clear and beautiful statement of the poet's

philosophy of life — Life and its correlative Death. As the shadows lengthen and the sands of time are sinking, when many men of his years are overcome by a great melancholy as they feel themselves drifting from the sunlight and the blue skies of earth, which after all were very beautiful, the aged Rabbi looks widely over the years that are past, and is glorious in the majesty of his faith. Listen to the strong and vigorous tones of his utterance—

> Grow old along with me!
> The best is yet to be,
> The last of life, for which the first was made.

Life is not to be measured by the fleeting years of youth, with its

unsatisfied yearnings, its frequent blunders, its multitudinous imperfections. Youth is but the practising-ground for the sterner and wiser warfare of manhood and maturity.

> Our times are in His hand,
> Who saith, "A whole I planned,
> "Youth shows but half; trust God: see all,
> nor be afraid!"

But what of those very "hopes and fears" of youth, those evidences of weakness and disaster? Shall they not irrevocably doom the whole life? What of the doubts that toss the soul and threaten to wreck the frail bark? Despair not, says the Rabbi, even doubts may have an honest part to play in the economy

of life. They may be heaven-sent propheeies of higher things, pledges of nobler capabilities, the birth-throes of a new and holier being.

Rather I prize the doubt
Low kinds exist without,
Finished and finite clods, untroubled by a spark.

Rejoice we are allied
To that which doth provide
And not partake, effect and not receive!
A spark disturbs our clod;
Nearer we hold of God
Who gives, than of His tribes that take, I must believe.

James Martineau had the same idea when he wrote that "To get good is animal, to do good is human, to be good is divine."

Then, welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,

Each sting that bids, nor sit, nor stand, but go!
Be our joys three-parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never
grudge the throe.

From thence,—a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks,—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me;
A brute I might have been, but would not
sink i' the scale.

There is in human life a continual warfare between flesh and soul, the lower and the higher. The contemptible man is he who takes flesh as his criterion and levels down his soul to match it; but

To man propose this test—
Thy body at its best,
How far can that project thy soul on its lone way?

The man of noble parts will so discipline flesh that soul and flesh assist each other in the onward struggle for perfection—

> Thence shall I pass, approved
> A man, for aye removed
> From the developed brute; a god though in the germ.

So is old age but a vantage-point gained through struggle, perplexity, and defeat; but still gained! And there, on the summit of the crag, the eagle soul rests awhile, it may be, to preen its ruffled plumage, but only that it may mount refreshed into the vaster depths of still untraversed air. Life so regarded is a time of rapturous opportunity, a battlefield for brave

and doughty deeds to be wrought out, where honour and chivalry must be displayed, and each campaign's experiences teach what weapons and what armour will best win for us future victories. Youth, though a period largely problematical in its issues, is the preparation time in which to try the temper of the soul, so that old age comes as no dreaded, ghostly vision of weakness and decrepit helplessness, but of developed and chastened ripeness. Past experience is thus the ground of future hope—

> The Future I may face now I have proved the Past.

In youth there may be the furnace

of testing, even the furnace of affliction, but "what survives is gold."

But what of the grim spectre Death, its terrors, its cold, clammy touch, the close of Life's music, the dulling of Life's activities—the last dread Monster, whose giant form shall shut out the sunshine and lead to the impenetrable Darkness?

Thou waitedest age: wait death, nor be afraid!

Death to Browning was no terrorising monster, but the crowning experience of this world's Life, the portal of Eternity. It was the necessary avenue of approach to the country of increased possibilities, the land of higher Service. It was a

stage in the evolution of Life. So, once more,

Wait death, nor be afraid!

II

But, again, what of the world's cruel judgments, its placid conventionalities, its shallow morality and lack of spiritual insight? We have to learn that there is a higher success than the approbation of vulgar minds. The world is incapable to judge of failure or success. Its judgments are often hasty, prejudiced, cruel, undeserved. And what man frequently casts off as useless failure God seizes and converts into the most glorious

success. Failure here does not necessarily imply failure there.

> Thoughts hardly to be packed
> Into a narrow act,
> Fancies that broke through language and escaped;
> All I could never be,
> All, men ignored in me,
> This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

The reach of soul, the panting for the highest, these prove that I am linked with the Divine. "As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God." It is the struggle for Perfection, the reaching out into the infinite beyond, that marks man's true nobility; and failure here to grasp

the highest is no failure, but the pledge of a supreme success in God's great Future.

So the Rabbi brings us to the conclusion that the most potent factor in human life is God. He formed it. He has been in continual touch with it, moulding it to His own design—

> He fixed thee mid this dance
> Of plastic circumstance.

And though Time is fleeting, Soul is eternal. And the experiences of the soul's struggle will endure, all of them determining forces of the final product, and evident in that product.

> Fool! All that is, at all,
> Lasts ever, past recall;

Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand
sure:
What entered into thee,
That was, is, and shall be:
Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and
clay endure.

We are only temporarily conditioned by earth and its limitations. The soul is through youth and age being trained for the eternal life of the future; and of life in time and eternity Service is at once the sanction and the inspiration.

Look not thou down but up!
To uses of a cup,
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's
peal,
The new wine's foaming flow,
The Master's lips a-glow!
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what need'st
thou with earth's wheel?

III

Therefore here and ever man's need is God, his soul's thirst is for God, his highest thoughts and tenderest emotions point and lead to God—

> But I need, now, as then,
> Thee, God, who mouldest men.

In man there may and will be weakness, but God is strength. There may be failure, but God is able to turn earth's failures into heaven's successes. There may be doubts, but they shall be resolved at the touch of the Great Musician, and eternal harmonies shall issue forth.

So to Browning life was no weak, mean, pusillanimous dreamland, but

the training-ground for man's highest virtues and his most robust manliness, his most glorious ambitions and his divinest hopes. Within the compass of the three-score years and ten of earth's pilgrimage, Youth means vision, Manhood an ever-increasing realisation, Old Age, the ripened judgment, the wisdom that comes only from experience. And beyond? "Your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams." Dreams of an infinite future, dreams of the perfection of activities, dreams of the Face of God. And so looking into that Face, the aged Rabbi commits himself for time and eternity into God's strong keeping, heart aglow

and eyes radiant with the clear, pure light of heaven—

So, take and use Thy work:
Amend what flaws may lurk,
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!
My times be in Thy hand!
Perfect the cup as planned!
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same.

II

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SMALL DUTIES

"THE BOY AND THE ANGEL"

In *Pippa Passes* Browning had elaborated in most charming fashion an idea that had come to him once during a lonely walk in an English wood—the idea of a lowly soul, insignificant among men, unconsciously touching other lives at critical moments, and so determining the issue of their times of testing. He showed us how Pippa, the little peasant girl of the silk mills at Asolo, singing through her one day's holiday of the year in joyous innocence, roused the slumber-

ing conscience of a depraved woman, drew forth the true nobility of a disappointed man, fired anew the patriotism of an infatuated youth, and stayed the hand of Monsignor the Bishop, as with his Intendant he plotted a cold and cruel murder.

In such ways, thought Browning, may the issues of men's lives be cast, by seeming trifles: but in the light of such possibilities, he muses, can anything in life be regarded as a trifle? While such unconscious influences are possible, nothing is great, nothing is small; the humblest duty, the smallest praise may have the most far-reaching consequences. This thought is the theme of Pippa's song,

with which she begins and ends her day of freedom.

All service ranks the same with God:
If now, as formerly He trod
Paradise, His presence fills
Our earth, each only as God wills
Can work—God's puppets, best and worst,
Are we; there is no last nor first.

Say not a "small event!" Why "small"?
Costs it more pain than this, ye call
A "great event," should come to pass,
Than that? Untwine me from the mass
Of deeds which make up life, one deed
Power shall fall short in, or exceed!

I

This idea of the unknown influence and value of Small Duties the poet once more takes up in his imaginary legend of *The Boy and the Angel.*

Each life throughout God's universe has a duty to perform that is its very own, and that may not be relegated to another. Done gladly, heartily, joyously, it is of incalculable worth, and has its true and indispensable place in the great chorus of the activities of Earth and Heaven.

Morning, evening, noon and night,
"Praise God!" sang Theocrite.

Then to his poor trade he turned,
Whereby the daily meal was earned.

Hard he laboured, long and well;
O'er his work the boy's curls fell.

But ever, at each period,
He stopped and sang "Praise God!"

Then back again his curls he threw,
And cheerful turned to work anew.

What a picture of contented, joyous activity. He had a work to do and he did it. It was *his* work, proportionate to his powers, affording exercise to his body and delight to his soul; it is the very exuberance of healthy toil.

"Life," wrote Westcott, "is an opportunity of Service."

"Life," wrote Mazzini, "is a Mission; Duty, therefore, is its highest law."

"Blessed," wrote Carlyle, "is the man who has found his Work; let him ask no other blessedness."

In the spirit of these master-thinkers wrought Theocrite. He experienced in his humble calling "the

wild joys of living." Work was the natural expression of his life's aims, at once the origin and the justification of his joy.

> Said Blaise, the listening monk, "Well done;
> I doubt not thou art heard, my son:
>
> "As well as if thy voice to-day
> Were praising God, the Pope's great way.
>
> "This Easter Day, the Pope at Rome
> Praises God from Peter's dome."

Ah! what great vision of exalted Service is conjured up to the boyish imagination by the monk's words. St. Peter's dome! That were a work to form the climax of a glorious life. How blessed above the measure of ordinary men must he be who is permitted to serve God in such high

and holy fashion. And the cell grew narrow as the vision faded, the tools mean, the work contemptible.

Said Theocrite, "Would God that I
"Might praise Him, that great way, and die!"

And at the word, the fashion of his future was changed. He renounced the service that seemed now so insignificant, and the singing of his lowly joy was heard no more.

Night passed, day shone,
And Theocrite was gone.

Gone into the wide world to get for himself a name, to work the weary rounds of slow advance towards the attainment of his life's new wild ideal. And most men knew it not, and all men cared not that it was so.

But God in high heaven, His ear bent earthwards to catch the varied sounds that issued from the joys and sorrows of men, missed the singing of the humble toiler; the glad note of healthy joy that sang to the swing of the hammer and the driving of the saw had ceased. And God knew that it was so, and was sad in consequence. The music of the Universe was the poorer now that the song that had come from the pure lips of the humble craftsman was wanting.

God said in Heaven, "Nor day nor night
"Now brings the voice of my delight."

Then Gabriel, like a rainbow's birth,
Spread his wings and sank to earth;

Entered, in flesh, the empty cell,
Lived there, and played the craftsman well;

And morning, evening, noon and night,
Praised God in place of Theocrite.

Gabriel, in the humility of his deep condescension, wrought at the lowly task and sang his angel song, and the courts of Heaven echoed its majesty and its sweetness. Still, to the ear of the Almighty, it was unsatisfying because unfitting; it was not the praise of man doing man's work, it lacked the spontaneity and the simplicity of youth.

God said, "A praise is in Mine ear;
"There is no doubt in it, no fear:

"So sing old worlds, and so
"New worlds that from My footstool go.

"Clearer loves sound other ways:
"I miss my little human praise."

II

Once more a change comes over the poet's vision. Once more it is Easter Day in St. Peter's, Rome, an Easter Day that is to witness the realisation of the wild ideal of him who had left his poor cell to try his strength with the great wide world of men, and was now to take his seat on the throne of St. Peter.

But the will of God is greater than the wish of mortals.

Then forth sprang Gabriel's wings, off fell
The flesh disguise, remained the cell.

'Twas Easter Day: he flew to Rome,
And paused about Saint Peter's dome.

In the tiring-room close by
The great outer gallery,

With his holy vestments dight,
Stood the new Pope, Theocrite:

And all his past career
Came back upon him clear,

Since when, a boy, he plied his trade,
Till on his life the sickness weighed;

And in his cell, when death grew near,
An angel in a dream brought cheer:

And rising from the sickness drear
He grew a priest, and now stood here.

To the East with praise he turned,
And on his sight the angel burned.

"I bore thee from thy craftsman's cell
"And set thee here; I did not well.

"Vainly I left my angel-sphere,
"Vain was thy dream of many a year.

"Thy voice's praise seemed weak; it dropped—
"Creation's chorus stopped!

"Go back and praise again
"The early way, while I remain.

"With that weak voice of our disdain,
"Take up creation's pausing strain.

"Back to the cell and poor employ:
"Resume the craftsman and the boy!"

Theocrite grew old at home;
A new Pope dwelt in Peter's dome.

One vanished as the other died:
They sought God side by side.

Think of it, ye humble sons and daughters of earth! Ye whose lives appear to you so small, your life's work so insignificant. Ye who have bemoaned the fate that has kept you from praising God some *great* way. Ye whose lives seem to lack the rapture and the beatific glory of angels and archangels—ye are here

to serve God in *your* way, which is for you the best way, and to God the most acceptable way. Your humble toil has its part to contribute to the mighty sum-total of the world's output of Work; your lilt of praise and thanksgiving may enter into the Eternal Chorus of the Universe of the great God; the expression of *your* joy, *your* thankfulness, *your* praise.

And if you withhold your service, insignificant as it may seem to you, if you grudge the Praise, unworthy of acceptance at God's hands as you may imagine it, the Chorus of Creation will be broken, the harmonies of Earth and Heaven will be incomplete,

and God will be unsatisfied. And angels and archangels will be unable to fill up the void—*your* work must be done by *you*.

Courage then, my brothers! The world needs you: God needs you. Your lives, seemingly so small, are of infinite value; seemingly so insignificant, yet in the economy of Life they have a true and vital part to play. Distance swallows up distinctions. It takes a man to do a man's work and an angel to do an angel's. Man, man's way; the angel, the angel's way; each in his own way—and God is satisfied.

III

THE TRAGEDY OF GENIUS

"ANDREA DEL SARTO"

ANDREA DEL SARTO was born at Florence in 1488, and died of the plague in 1531. He was called the "Faultless Painter," from the splendid technical exactness of his drawings; but he was linked to a worthless, frivolous wife, to satisfy whose insatiable vanity he prostrated his genius and ruined his character. These intensely dramatic elements in the life and work of a great artist, the combination of strength and weakness in the same character—of artistic

strength and moral weakness—gave to Browning a theme worthy of his powers. The result is a poem of fascinating interest and powerful import.

I

Browning was an artist in instincts and appreciation, and he speaks of Art and artists as Sir Walter Scott speaks of Law and lawyers, *from within*, as one of the innermost circle of the elect souls of the profession. He knew their aims, their motives, their ideals, their difficulties, their sorrows, and their joys. He knew also their tools and their methods of manipulating them. As you read

such poems as *Fra Lippo Lippi* and *Pictor Ignotus*, the paints, the canvases, the brushes, the models, the arrangements of the studio, are all present in undeniable reality. "These Browning poems," says Mr. G. K. Chesterton, "do not merely deal with painting; they smell of paint." So in the opening section of *Andrea del Sarto* we have a piece of realism, no less vivid, in the sudden conception of a picture-subject that is flashed upon the mind of the artist.

Andrea and his wife, Lucrezia, are sitting together at an open window, looking out towards the hills of Fiesole. It is early evening, and the shadows are merging into delicious

half-lights. The world of nature lies still and cool without, and with a drowsy tendency to slumber. Andrea gazes at the woman whose beauty has ravished his being, wondering how by the exercise of his art he can raise money sufficient to satisfy her vanity, and so make Utility serve the purposes of Love. And as he gazes, in a moment, with the revealing power of the lightning-flash, the inspiration comes.

So! keep looking so—
. . . Why there's my picture ready made,
There's what we painters call our harmony!
A common greyness silvers everything,—
All in a twilight, you and I alike
—You, at your first point of your first pride in me
(That's gone, you know),—but I, at every point;

My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned
down
To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole.
There's the bell clinking from the chapel-top;
That length of convent-wall across the way
Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside;
The last monk leaves the garden; days decrease,
And autumn grows, autumn in everything.
Eh? The whole seems to fall into a shape
As if I saw alike my work and self
And all that I was born to be and do,
A twilight-piece.

True, true! great Master Painter,—"a twilight-piece"—a study of departing Light and lengthening Shadows, of a Beauty that is close allied with Sadness, that is, moreover, the precursor of a deeper Gloom—the midnight gloom of unutterable Despair.

II

And here the tragedy begins, under the Soul-Analysis that Browning could effect with such cunning power.

This man, held in the toils of a worthless woman as fatally as ever bird was held by the snare of the fowler, this man was possessed of consummate artistic genius, and he knew it.

I do what many dream of, all their lives,
—Dream? strive to do, and agonise to do,
And fail in doing. I could count twenty such
On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,
Who strive—you don't know how the others strive
To paint a little thing like that you smeared
Carelessly passing with your robes afloat,—
Yet do much less, so much less, Someone says,

(I know his name, no matter)—so much less!
Well, less is more, Lucrezia: I am judged.

Here a mighty truth breaks upon him. What if these poor despised brethren of the brush, who toiled and agonised in the vain effort to equal the perfection of his drawing; what if in some true essential of art and life and character they were the sharers of a joy that even he had never experienced? What if his very "faultlessness" had meant the shutting out of Vision, the stunting of Power, the crippling of Genius? What if, in the satisfying of himself, he had failed to draw from men a fuller Life and point them to a nobler Heaven?

He sees in this crisis of his experience that it is even so. The illuminating flash had done its work even better than he had imagined. It had not only revealed to him his picture-subject, but it had laid bare the meanness of his own soul, the secret of the failure of his own genius, and the reason likewise of the charm and appeal of the work of obscurer men.

There burns a truer light of God in them,
In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,
Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine.
Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me.

"Completeness, indeed," wrote Bishop Westcott, "is but another name for ascertained limitation. The grandest and highest faculties of man are exactly those in which he most feels his weakness and imperfection. They are at present only half-fulfilled prophecies of powers which, as we believe, shall yet find an ample field for unrestricted developments."

Well, *less is more,* Lucrezia: I am judged.

Yes, Andrea has caught the truth now. "Less is More." The striving after the More with sweat of brow and agony of soul is better than the facile accomplishment of the Less.

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

He points to a work of Rafael: the arm is out of drawing: he could put it right.

A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines,
Its body, so to speak: its soul is right,
He means right—that, a child may understand.
Still, what an arm! And I could alter it.

That is the point. Andrea could perfect the weakness of the arm; he could not emulate the strength and serenity of the soul. True Art must produce, or tend to produce, true Life, and the mere correctness of technical details cannot accomplish this. The Creator must ever breathe into the nostrils of the Created the

breath of Life; then and then only can it become living Soul. Much as we must all admire the exquisite detail work of Sir Noel Paton, do we not prefer the broad, sometimes crude, but always suggestive and inspiring work of G. F. Watts? So too will we hold to the Soul work of Rafael rather than the Body work of Andrea del Sarto.

III

But not only had his Art failed in the highest sense through the limitations of its very perfection. His Life had failed also, and the failure of the life must largely be held responsible for the failure of the art. No good

work can come from an ignoble life, nothing of inspiration, nothing of real helpfulness. "I was confirmed of this opinion," wrote Milton in a well-known passage, "that he who would not be frustrate in his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himself to be a true poem." And Milton dreamed his dreams of Paradise.

It is eternally true, "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit." A man's *Work* is the measure of his *Life* and the index of his *Character*.

No sadder sight can mortal eyes behold than the sight of heaven-born

genius selling itself for dross, whether it be the dross of filthy lucre or the dross of a defiled and a defiling love. Andrea del Sarto was a man of consummate gifts ; but though his works will doubtless call forth our admiration for the charm and felicity of their drawing, he is likely to be remembered as an example of genius prostituted, honour sacrificed, character destroyed.

Choosing Earth he lost Heaven, gaining " the whole World " he lost " his own Soul."

IV

HIGH FAILURE AND LOW SUCCESS

"A GRAMMARIAN'S FUNERAL"

In striking contrast to Andrea del Sarto, who in the attainment of Earth's perfection lost the capacity of soul that reaches out towards the Infinitudes of Heaven, we have in *A Grammarian's Funeral* a presentation of a totally different character, who had been content to struggle and to strive without respect to men's approbation; fearless enough to denounce their platitudes, and, if need be, to fly in the face of their best-hugged conventionalities. Man's ap-

plause he sought not; the lack of it daunted him not; the issues of his life lay not in the transitory smile of Earth and Time, but in the approving "Well done" of Heaven and Eternity.

The hero of the poem is a sample and type of the truest exponents of the New Learning at the time of the Renaissance, an epoch that marvellously fascinated the mind of Browning, who had ever held that all hope for man lay in the full use of man's powers, in his unstinted energy and unwearying toil. Man was to earn his bread and to save his soul, and, moreover, to uplift the world by the sweat of his brow. This

effort might meet with failure, but in effort alone lay the possibility of salvation.

And the Renaissance period was just such a rousing to effort on the part of an awakening world. Men had become conscious again of their own reality. They looked out upon the universe with the large eyes of the Little Child. It was an age of Wonder and of New Life ; it was the fresh dawning of an increased Consciousness, a new realisation of the sacredness of Individuality and the dignity of Moral Judgments. Fetters and limitations of all kinds were resented if not ignored. Freedom, Ambition, unbounded Possibility, be-

came the watchwords of men's lives. Literature, Art, Religion, Philosophy began to assume new shapes, being animated by new hopes and more exalted ideals. And in the main this was good, though some of its less immediate results were possibly not good; so easy is it to fall away from the first clear vision of high-born souls to the dimmer light of an unproportioned enthusiasm.

I

But never perhaps has the lofty side of the Renaissance movement been shown to us so admirably, certainly never within the compass

of one short poem, as we have it here in *A Grammarian's Funeral.*

The scholar is shown to us as having been animated by the loftiest and strongest hopes, living and working in the conscious dignity of a rediscovered manhood, consumed by the desire for learning, hungering and thirsting after all that is high and holy, greedy for the very crumbs of scholarship, and fearful lest they should fall to the ground and be trodden underfoot of men. By his zeal and thoroughness he was laying a foundation upon which a more than Earthly wisdom could be built. For, like Rabbi Ben Ezra, he saw Life as a whole, Eternity the consum-

mation of Time. So in Time was he working for Eternity.

No end to learning:
Earn the means first—God surely will contrive
Use for our earning.

Others mistrust and say, "But Time escapes:
"Live now or never!"
He said, "What's Time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!
"Man has Forever."

Here we can see the poet of the nineteenth century looking through the eyes of the Renaissance scholar. For Browning undoubtedly loathed one being above all others—the man who set his life towards the attainment of quick and cheap results. This was his horror of great darkness, the "abomination of desolation," the

mark of the beast! If Browning in his great, wide heart could possibly condemn a soul to the hopelessness of perdition, it would, without doubt, be the soul of the man who shrinks from the great venture of Faith, hugging the earth and so making sure of that lest he should fail to attain to heaven. "O ye of little faith," cries the poet, "wherefore didst thou doubt? Cast thy bread upon the waters, and thou shalt find it *after many days*."

> Oh, if we draw a circle premature,
> Heedless of far gain,
> Greedy for quick returns of profit, sure
> Bad is our bargain!

The call to choose in this respect

comes to all men, sooner or later: Earth or Heaven; which shall it be? For on the choice hang the eternal issues of life. Earth may mean friends and favours and flattery; Heaven may imply the agony of failure, the unsatisfied cravings of the soul, the gnawing hunger of ambitious hopes. What then shall the choice be? Earth holds out to us *now* the cup of her sparkling wine, "with beaded bubbles winking at the brim": it costs little, its exhilarations are immediate, it dulls care and quickens merriment, and the dance of life under its influence gets madder and more exciting. And then? only this—"At the last it

biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder." The bite of an accusing conscience; the sting of wasted hopes and squandered opportunities.

Heaven, on the other hand, may have to offer us *now* the cup of humiliation and suffering, perhaps of degradation and insult. But the wine of heaven does not cloud the brain and distort the judgment; it strengthens the soul and widens the vision. Not what *is now*, but what *shall be*. Not what we *are*, but what we *may become*! Therefore is the present too precious to squander for the quick returns of earth, too real to be lived for its own sake.

The vision of high hopes is a vision for all Time—Time and its extension and fulfilment Eternity. What then shall the choice be ?

He ventured neck or nothing—heaven's success
Found, or earth's failure:
"Wilt thou trust death or not?" He answered
"Yes:
"Hence with life's pale lure!"
That low man seeks a little thing to do,
Sees it, and does it:
This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
Dies ere he knows it.

Death, however, has a strangely different meaning for the two types of men. To the man of Earth's quick returns it closes the round of his petty pleasures. He struts the scenes of his successes no more. Cold

death has touched him with its clammy finger. And having had so much of the satisfaction of Earth, what claim has he on the satisfaction of Heaven? "Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things." Remember! The pleasure is past; Earth wooed thee for her very own, and flattered thee to the summit of thy pride of self. But Earth's domain stops at the grave, and she must leave thee now to wander in the great howling wilderness of lost chances and divine displeasure. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Death to the man of Faith and Vision who has ventured "neck or

nothing," seeking the "far gain" of Heaven, spurning the "quick returns" of Earth—Death to this man means the victory of soul over body, an exchange of the corruptible for the incorruptible. Sown in weakness he has been raised in power, nearer his Ideals and his Hopes, into the very presence of the God who has been the vital principle of his innermost being.

> That low man goes on adding one to one,
> His hundred's soon hit:
> This high man, aiming at a million,
> Misses a unit.

But whereas "the low man" can only *remember*, for his day is gone, the "high man" has the boundless

realms of Eternity in which to continue his search.

That has the world here—should he need the next,
Let the world mind him!
This, throws himself on God, and unperplexed
Seeking shall find him.

The fulfilment of the Vision is yet to come, but it is assured. High Failure is more to be desired than Low Success.

II

Death overtook the scholar while he was yet in the midst of his labours. Undaunted and undeterred by pain and weakness of body, "dead from

the waist down," he conned the minutiæ of classical scholarship.

So, with the throttling hands of death at strife,
Ground he at grammar.

Indomitable will! Most exquisite drudgery!

And now his students are taking his body to the burial. And where shall they lay it?

Let us begin and carry up this corpse,
Singing together.
Leave we the common crofts, the vulgar thorpes
Each in its tether
Sleeping safe on the bosom of the plain,
Cared-for till cock-crow:
Look out if yonder be not day again
Rimming the rock-row!

That's the appropriate country; there, man's thought,
Rarer, intenser,
Self-gathered for an outbreak, as it ought,
Chafes in the censer.

On to the mountain-top, up, up let him be carried; fit resting-place for one who had ever lived among the high places of life, scorning the low and the mean.

Our low life was the level's and the night's;
He's for the morning.

So they start on their journey, winding upwards towards the height and the morning singing together, and their chanting is heard stronger and fuller as they reach the clearer air nearing the summit. In the spirit

of their dead master—who, by the way, we feel all through is *not* dead but verily and indeed present—fearing no obstacles, shunning no dangers, they climb in the very ecstasy of the joy of the New Life. The Vigour, the Strength, the Ambition, the strenuous Climbing, the final reaching of the summit of the mountain's topmost peak—these are of the very essence of the Renaissance spirit, and they are all bodied forth in action here in the poem.

Well, here's the platform, here's the proper
place:
Hail to your purlieus,
All ye highfliers of the feathered race,
Swallows and curlews!

Here's the top-peak; the multitude below
Live, for they can, there:
This man decided not to Live but Know—
Bury this man there?
Here—here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,
Lightnings are loosened,
Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,
Peace let the dew send!
Lofty designs must close in like effects:
Loftily lying,
Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,
Living and dying.

V

IMPERFECTION

"CLEON"

The true prophet is he who speaks to man in the hour of his sorest need. When knees grow feeble and hands hang down for very weariness, when the present seems hopeless and the outlook is dark with lowering tempests, when God seems far off and evil presses at close quarters with ever-increasing energy, then the prophet may utter his voice and startle a dying race into the conscious vigour of a new life, new in hopes, new in aims, new in God-given impulses.

Now, without doubt, the sense of Imperfection in all things human is a source of much discomfort and trial to mankind, and ever has been since man rose to the dignity of his manhood over the head of the brute creation. There is so much that man *cannot* do, so many visions he *cannot* realise, so many fascinating regions he *cannot* explore. On all sides he is beset with the consciousness of Limitation and Imperfection. It is depressing, cramping, humiliating. And there rises instinctively to human lips the utterance of the ETERNAL WHY. Why may we not fathom the deep mysteries of Consciousness, of Volition, of Personality? Why

may we not reach out with giant arms into the utmost infinitudes of space and ransack the whole Cosmos of its treasures, as lords of creation? Why is Goodness not supreme in the lives of all men, and God the unquestioned King of kings and Lord of lords? Why does so much of our best effort spell failure, and why are our warmest hopes destined so often to be dashed to the ground? Why do weakness and helplessness and imperfection hem us in and limit our lives and break our hearts? So does man cry out in his helplessness.

And as in the midst of all the marvellous unfolding of the nineteenth century men's hearts yearned

for fuller power, wider knowledge, juster dealings, yet were sickened by the sense of weakness and limitation —as some of these men hurled reproaches at Heaven for His cramping laws, and blasphemed the Maker of Worlds, the voice of Robert Browning the Prophet was heard with its glorious message of Hope and Immortality just when men most needed it.

I

And we are taken back by him in thought to the Greek world at the beginning of our Era. Just when the glory of Greece was most pitiful; her very national life brought low

and overridden by the lordly Roman. Just when her philosophers, become Sophists, had sold themselves for gold to the princelings of the Empire, bartering the fair Greek culture for the filthy lucre of the market-place. Just when she had lost faith in humanity, except as a source of revenue, and Olympus had been robbed alike of its splendour and its terrors. But just, too, when in the midst of this blank despair a new hope, yet largely unheeded or unknown, had arisen for the world in the teaching of the followers of the despised Nazarene; and Paul of Tarsus had called forth the ridicule of the supercilious critics of Mars

Hill by preaching the certainty of the Resurrection. Just to that turning-point of the ages, when the death agony of the Old order was being lost in the rapturous cry of the New Life that was slowly yet surely making itself heard, to such a time are we led to learn the significance of human Imperfection; and strangely enough it is from the Old rather than from the New that the voice comes. It is the pagan poet of decadent Greece who is to set the vision that shall irradiate life and make man patient in the face of mystery.

The vision is dim, exasperatingly dim; the voice is weak, painfully weak; the truth lies in the realisa-

tion of a forlorn hope that even the man who utters it has not the courage to believe. But it *may* be. The heart yearns for it; and this very yearning is proof that one day it *shall* be. Once more it is the *tendency* of life, the *stretch* of soul, that determines a man's true value; for these things are the prophetic marking of the lines of his ultimate development.

That man was made for Life and Service and the Worship of God, Saint Paul had proved to the men of Athens; God was no creature of man's imagination, no theory of his intellect, but a veritable reality in Whom we live and move and have

our being. "*As certain also of your own poets have said*, for we are also His offspring." This phrase, with all its suggestiveness, is seized upon by Browning as the starting-point of his poem. Nor does he stop to weigh the evidence between Aratus and Cleanthes in point of authorship. He takes him for granted, and calls him Cleon. The name is nothing; the germ of vital truth, the ray of pure light—these are everything. And it is characteristic of the man that he thus recognises worth at its eternal value, and chooses a poet of the most decadent age of a decadent race, who only hints at, yearns for, but dare not believe the great and

comforting truth that is to relieve the world's gloom, rather than the strong and vigorous champion of the Christian faith, who is overwhelmed by no doubt, daunted by no failure, hopeful in the face of defeat; "sorrowful yet alway rejoicing." It is a mark of the exuberant optimism of the man thus to prove his point from a doubtful case—to rejoice, as it were, that the Midianitish foes of humanity are after all to be overcome by Gideon's three hundred rather than by the thirty thousand who had at first answered to the trumpet's call.

II

But to the nearer consideration of our subject-poem.

Cleon, the poet, has received many costly gifts from his friend and patron, Protus the king; and with the gifts a letter which he proceeds to answer.

Protus feels the hollowness of the age, its materialism, its unsatisfying delights. Death, when it comes, will wipe his name from the book of the living; he will pass into the great and dread Unknown from out this cramped existence which men call Life, and—well, there will be an end of him. The Present without Satisfaction, the Future without Hope.

And Cleon does for Protus what Browning does for Cleon—points to the faint evidence, though it be but faint, that in his composite being each man has the potentialities of a fuller and a larger life. But with this difference. To Browning the faint gleam is regarded as the first ray of the rising sun, whereas to Cleon it is but the last flicker of a dying meteor; and he ends his dissertation in a ghastly surrender of the little truth he has been permitted to see, and the poem closes in an atmosphere of morbid and biting cynicism.

The building of the Tower by Protus the king was a symbol and an

evidence of his craving after the wider vision.

Thou, in the daily building of thy Tower,—
Whether in fierce and sudden spasms of toil,
Or through dim lulls of unapparent growth,
Or when the general work 'mid good acclaim
Climbed with the eye to cheer the architect,—
Didst ne'er engage in work for mere work's sake—
Hadst ever in thy heart the luring hope
Of some eventual rest a-top of it,
Whence, all the tumult of the building hushed,
Thou first of men mightst look out to the East:
The vulgar saw thy Tower, thou sawest the sun.

So much of human Imperfection, we are led to infer, is due to lack of Vision. Our view of life is poor and unsatisfying because our standpoint is too near the ground. We must climb the hills and widen our horizon if we would see Heaven the extension

of Earth, Eternity the fulfilment of Time, and Perfection the natural sequence of Imperfection.

For, what we call this life of men on earth,
This sequence of the soul's achievements here
Being, as I find much reason to conceive,
Intended to be viewed eventually
As a great whole, not analysed to parts,
But each part having reference to all—
How shall a certain part, pronounced complete,
Endure effacement by another part?
Was the thing *done*?—then, what's to do again?

Growth is the condition and the interpretation of Life; and growth does not end with Earth's brief dole of years. The measure of the stature of the fulness of the ideal man has a wider compass than can be fetched here below. And Perfection can only be correctly regarded as a final con-

summation—the result of development through countless ages. True ideals are to serve for the Here, but also for the Hereafter. Therefore must Imperfection be a condition of our present existence. It cannot be otherwise. And so we are led to the splendid thought that is the pearl of great price in this most worthy poem—

> That imperfection means perfection hid,
> Reserved in part, to grace the after-time.

An after-time destined to be so glorious that the present-time is glorious in anticipation. The satisfying Future is the answer to the unsatisfying Present. But by reason of that Future the Present has a

glory of its very own—the glamour of romance, the rapture of confident faith, the assurance of ultimate victory.

> Man might live at first
> The animal life: but *is there nothing more?*

Yes, indeed; greater than eye hath seen, more beautiful than ear hath heard, such as hath never entered into the heart of man to conceive in all its wondrous significance.

> In man there's failure, only since he left
> The lower and inconscious forms of life.
> We called it an advance, the rendering plain
> Man's spirit might grow conscious of man's life,
> And, by new lore so added to the old,
> Take each step higher over the brute's head.

So in the meantime even failure

may be held the badge of man's proudest heritage, the heritage of his humanity that alone can be and shall be increasingly linked with the divine, till failure shall be no more. Failure exists only to be converted into success, sin only to be changed to righteousness, Imperfection only to lead us in humility to that which is Perfect. And "when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away."

III

Is there then a place in our poor imperfect lives for Joy? Even Cleon thought so.

> There's a world of capability
> For joy, spread round about us, meant for us,
> Inviting us.

At least so he speaks when he looks abroad in thought from the summit of the king's tower. But the effort to sustain belief in it is too great, and he comes to earth with the confession,

> It skills not! life's inadequate to joy,
> As the soul sees joy, tempting life to take.

Yet without joy all rapture fades,

and the mists of earth gather thick upon him. And in his new despair he makes one more venture towards the light.

> It is so horrible,
> I dare at times imagine to my need
> Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,
> Unlimited in capability
> For joy, as this is in desire for joy.

But the gleam passes onwards and he lags behind in the shadow.

> Zeus has not yet revealed it; and alas,
> He must have done so, were it possible!

So he ends. The hopeless cynicism of his age, the heart-rending slavery of all that was noblest in man to what was base and low would not suffer him to hope his pale hope and

dream his dream of the satisfying Hereafter, and so enable him to bless and be blessed by the opportunities of the Present. Even the report of the preaching of "one called Paulus" gripped him not. He was a Greek, it is true, but to the Greeks of that decrepit age the preaching of the Christ was "foolishness."

Thou canst not think a mere barbarian Jew
As Paulus proves to be, one circumcized,
Hath access to a secret shut from us?
Thou wrongest our philosophy, O King,
In stooping to inquire of such an one,
As if his answer could impose at all!
He writeth, doth he? Well, and he may write.
Oh, the Jew findeth scholars! certain slaves
Who touched on this same isle, preached him
and Christ;
And (as I gather from a bystander)
Their doctrine could be held by no sane man.

But Cleon had, in the moment of his inspiration, answered his own questions, though he knew it not. The hope lay not in the fact that he was poet, musician, sculptor, painter, and philosopher—for he was all these, though he lacked originality, and, like so many men of his age, could only learn and co-ordinate the work of others who had lived before him. The hope lay rather in the one glimpse he obtained from the watch-tower of his kingly patron—the glimpse of the significance of human Imperfection. Only he held it not, but let the vision go. He wrestled not till the breaking of the day. He was rich in self-confidence, in criticism, in cynicism,

but he was weak in faith and hope and charity. Ultimately he dropped to earth and fed on the husks of earth's many swine.

God grant to us of a later age a humbler heart and a simpler trust.

VI

THE IMMORTALITY OF LOVE

"EVELYN HOPE"

Browning has been too much regarded as a poet of the Intellect, and his poems, consequently, have been criticised as perhaps very clever but certainly very difficult, and by no means yielding an adequate return to the reader. Now Browning, doubtless, was highly intellectual, but he was assuredly no pedant. His reading was wide and his memory extraordinary, and many of his poems are packed with splendid, closely reasoned thought. Still it is question-

able whether it is the depth of the intellectuality in his poems that is responsible for the so-called lack of intelligibility. Browning, we choose to think, is not *easy* for pretty much the same reason as Isaiah, for example, is not easy. The English poet was admittedly of mixed blood; he was the resultant of much mingling of nationalities. And whether or not he had any Hebrew blood in his veins, he certainly had much of the Hebrew character in his mental and spiritual composition. His robustness of energy, his vehemence of language, and, above all, his quick transitions of thought — these are intensely Hebraic. Consequently he is not

always easy to follow, but he is certainly almost without exception worth following, and worth taking no small trouble to follow. His treasures do not always lie on the surface. But who will say that of Browning alone this is true? Moreover, when this is so, the mental energy required of the reader is a wholesome and necessary stimulus that all the more perfectly puts him in sympathy with his author.

But, on the other hand, the truth of Browning's poems often lies, in the most obvious and even startling fashion, so very much on the surface, that worshippers of the poet are wont, in the glorification of his

alleged intellectuality, to seek out for themselves forced and occult interpretations. With such people Browning in his lifetime had absolutely no sympathy.

What simpler, sweeter poem than *Evelyn Hope* can be found in the whole broad world of our literature? Simple in its structure, simple in its graphic story, simple in the majesty of its message; sweet in the music of its rhythm and in the atmosphere of its human tenderness and spirituality. But even in its simplicity we are forced to an independent searching for a solution to its problem. Is it the romance of a hopeless love that has died ere it came to the birth, or

is it a vision for realisation in the future days of the extended life beyond the shadows ?

I

An aged lover stands by the bedside of a fair young girl who has lived out her few sweet, short years in ignorance of his love, perhaps of his existence,

> Till God's hand beckoned unawares,—
> And the sweet white brow is all of her.

A study, you will say, of the might-have-beens of life ! But now, despair and mourning and woe ! Yet is it necessarily so ? That is the problem.

> Is it too late then, Evelyn Hope?
> What, your soul was pure and true,
> The good stars met in your horoscope,
> Made you of spirit, fire and dew—

And, just because I was thrice as old
And our paths in the world diverged so wide,
Each was nought to each, must I be told?
We were fellow mortals, nought beside?

He has been a world-wanderer. But in his wanderings he has carried with him the vision of the fair child whose opening life gave to him the promise of so rich a future. The bud would blossom into the flower, the winsome girl would one day become the developed woman, and the glory of youth be transformed into the greater glory of maturity. So he dreamed, and in his dreams he drew near to her home. Could he now make known to her the secret of his love? Had the child

yet merged sufficiently into the woman?

But his rapture receives a sudden check, for the home he comes to is a home of drawn blinds and closed shutters, a home to many of shattered hopes and departed glory. The silver cord is loosed, the golden bowl is broken, and the mourners go about the streets.

Is it too late then, Evelyn Hope?

Thou wert but budding into the consciousness of Love's meaning, blindly perchance feeling out into the great world of a widening humanity for the responsive chord that should answer thine, and flood with melody

the tentative utterance of thy young heart. And he, the strong one, who held thee as the apple of his eye, and dreamed of thee as he tossed on the stormy billows; who saw thee dancing in the sunshine, and in the hour of danger was at thought of thee made brave to endure all hardships; he, thy lover, old in years but young in the intensity of his passion; he who loved thee in the babbling innocency of thy childhood and in the golden promise of thy developing womanhood—he has come to claim thee and to blend with thine his life, knowing that ye were made each for other. And now?

Is it too late then, Evelyn Hope?

This is the pivot of the poem. This is the problem propounded; and how shall it be answered?

II

To surrender to despair, to cry woe and give up the battle, to regard the old man's love for the fair young girl, who had perhaps never known him, certainly not as a lover; this may seem the easiest and quickest conclusion. It was a mistake, unfortunate, ridiculous perhaps, but it is ended now; bury it, forget it, try again. But Browning's hero does not so conclude. He reads the riddle otherwise. His love is real and powerful. That he knows, and he

stands unawed by the grim presence of Death, whose empire he also knows may be over the body, but *not* over the soul. Such love as his is not to be conditioned for ever by the accidental circumstances of earth. It is, as all true Love is, Eternal, destined to grow and to be glorified, and to meet with its due response, if not Here, then Hereafter. So the hero-lover draws his strong conclusion, mighty in the majesty of its bold and fearless trust.

Is it too late then, Evelyn Hope?
No, indeed! for God above,
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,
And creates the love to reward the love;
I claim you still, for my own love's sake.

Love, like Goodness, has an Eternal

value, though its full fruition may be not yet.

> Delayed it may be for more lives yet,
> Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few:
> Much is to learn, much to forget,
> Ere the time be come for taking you.

But the time *will* come.

Development is the only true significance of Life—its meaning, its aim, its justification. And all the tendencies of earth that make for Righteousness and Goodness and Love have upon them this seal of God's good pleasure—the assurance that they are independent of Change and Death. The illimitable Future alone can answer to the fitful struggle of the Present; but the very struggle indi-

cates the emergence of the new life, which may be but the old life glorified, stripped of its imperfections, conforming to its larger environment.

So the conscious reality of the love of the aged world-wanderer is the guarantee that it will one day meet its true response. His life had had its many varied experiences, with not a few real pleasures—

Yet one thing, one, in my soul's full scope,
  Either I missed or itself missed me:
And I want and find you, Evelyn Hope!
  What is the issue? let us see!

I loved you, Evelyn, all the while.
  My heart seemed full as it could hold!
There was place and to spare for the frank young smile,
  And the red young mouth, and the hair's young gold.

So hush,—I will give you this leaf to keep:
See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand!
There, that is our secret: go to sleep!
You will wake and remember, and understand.

This is the very Ecstasy of Faith. Death is conquered and hurled back into the deepest depths of his own black dominion. Here is the triumph of the Affections, the strong grip of the eternal issues of pure, strong Passion—a passion that can only be regarded as a faint index of the intense passion of the Love of God for His creatures.

Sleep on, sweet Evelyn Hope, and in God's good time

You will wake and remember, and understand.

VII

THE ETERNAL MOMENTS OF LIFE

"THE STATUE AND THE BUST"

Among the traditions of Florence is found a story of the Grand Duke Ferdinand the First, who is said to have loved a lady of surpassing beauty, who was married to a nobleman whom she did not love, and by whom she was kept a prisoner in his Palace of the Riccardi.

Browning has seized upon the story, and elaborated it to serve his purpose to point a tremendous moral. He makes the guilty love a mutual one, and the lovers resolve to flee,

so that they may escape the tyranny of unsympathetic lives, and live to the full the life of rapturous, unbridled appetite, merging their sluggish life-streams into one mad, rushing torrent of brilliant, if wicked, joy. Only they hesitate. To-morrow, they reason, will do to make the venture and snap asunder the cords of restricting conventionality. To-morrow comes, and yet they hesitate, content to revel for another day in the intoxication of expectancy. Still they hesitate, and days grow into weeks, and weeks into years. And the gallant bearing of the man and the subtle beauty of the woman become touched with the finger of Time;

and the fires of passion die down, and the dream of realisation becomes more distant and shadowy. Then it is too late. Life becomes passionless and commonplace, and all the lovers wish now is to fix, as far as they can, the memory of the hours of early rapture, and hand on that memory to posterity. So the Duke has his statue cast in bronze, and set in the Piazza of the Annunziata, and the lady her bust in *Della Robbia* ware, set in the window of her palace-prison, each looking to each as in the days when eyes were young and hearts were hopeful.

I

Such is Browning's elaboration of the story of the famous equestrian statue by John of Bologna, that stands in the Florentine piazza, a wonder of artistic skill—

There's a palace in Florence, the world knows
well,
And a statue watches it from the square,
And this story of both do our townsmen tell.

Ages ago, a lady there,
At the farthest window facing the East,
Asked, "Who rides by with the royal air?"

The bridesmaids' prattle around her ceased;
She leaned forth, one on either hand;
They saw how the blush of the bride increased—

They felt by its beats her heart expand—
As one at each ear and both in a breath
Whispered, "The Great-Duke Ferdinand."

That self-same instant, underneath,
The Duke rode past in his idle way,
Empty and fine like a swordless sheath.

Gay he rode, with a friend as gay,
Till he threw his head back—"Who is she?"
—"A bride the Riccardi brings home to-day."

Hair in heaps lay heavily
Over a pale brow spirit-pure—
Carved like the heart of the coal-black tree,

Crisped like a war-steed's encolure—
And vainly sought to dissemble her eyes
Of the blackest black our eyes endure.

And lo, a blade for a knight's emprise
Filled the fine empty sheath of a man,—
The Duke grew straightway brave and wise.

He looked at her, as a lover can;
She looked at him, as one who awakes:
The past was a sleep, and her life began.

So "the eyes of them both were opened"; they had eaten of the forbidden fruit of an illicit longing,

and they knew that to the gaze of the moral world "they were naked." Hence the resolve to flee, and hence also, on the discovery of this resolve, the anger of the unloved husband and his determination to keep her a fast prisoner within his palace walls.

Calmly he said that her lot was cast,
That the door she had passed was shut on her
Till the final catafalk repassed.

This knowledge only serves to strengthen the decision to flee; the turbulent stream becomes only the more turbulent the more it is impeded by the opposing rocks.

"I fly to the Duke who loves me well,
"Sit by his side, and laugh at sorrow
"Ere I count another ave-bell.

"'Tis only the coat of a page to borrow,
"And tie my hair in a horse-boy's trim,
"And I save my soul—but not to-morrow."

And here, for the first time, is heard the note of hesitancy and delay. Perhaps it is to indulge in the luxury of anticipation; perhaps it is the caution-finger of conscience; but what if it is the evidence of a weak will and a vacillating temperament? What if that which the passion is strong to devise, the will is weak to carry to fulfilment? It is a crucial test of character, and the putting off of the fulfilment of the strong resolve is nothing but an evidence of deplorable weakness.

"Is one day more so long to wait?
"Moreover the Duke rides past, I know;
"We shall see each other, sure as fate."

She turned on her side and slept. Just so!
So we resolve on a thing and sleep:
So did the lady, ages ago.

And as the lady resolves and dallies, so does the Duke. He will carry her off from her prison-house of broken hopes to the glorious liberty of consuming love. Only, not to-night. Once more the rapturous anticipation, once more the day's delay.

"Yet my passion must wait a night, nor cool—
"For to-day the Envoy arrives from France
"Whose heart I unlock with thyself, my tool.

"I need Thee still and might miss perchance.
"To-day is not wholly lost, beside
"With its hope of my lady's countenance:

"For I ride—what should I do but ride?
"And passing her palace, if I list,
"May glance at its window—well betide!"

So said, so done: nor the lady missed
One ray that broke from the ardent brow,
Nor a curl of the lips where the spirit kissed.

And each day as it came proved prolific of its fresh to-morrow. Each morning dreamed its dream, and each evening buried its hope.

Be sure that each renewed the vow,
No morrow's sun should arise and set
And leave them then as it left them now.

But next day passed, and next day yet,
With still fresh cause to wait one day more
Ere each leaped over the parapet.

And time sped onward with rapid wing, till its touch told sadly on the lady's beauty and the Duke's proud bearing. Then came the mockery of

the statue and the bust. The statue in the Piazza, the bust in the palace window; each placed so that the cold eyes seemed to meet as theirs had met day after day when the Duke rode by and the lady waved her recognition. And there they stand, according to Browning's expanded story, to teach the world of men and women some mighty lesson.

II

And that lesson forms no small part of the poet's Message to his age, and for that matter to all succeeding ages. It is the great and potent truth that life is wasted and character

ruined by the hesitations of weak souls. Whatever a man resolves to do in playing out the game of life, let his heart and soul be in his work, and let him carry it out to its fullest issues. It is the truth that half-heartedness is unworthy of humanity. Poor, limping, hesitating lives are the weak links in the chain of existence, unsatisfying to man, unpardonable by God.

To Browning there was always hope for the man who did what he had to do with a will, who spared no effort and spent himself courageously to fulfil his purposes. Whatever ideals a life may have, let them be pursued unflinchingly and uninterruptedly,

daunted by no difficulties, but keen and vigorous to the end. For only so do men, even in the midst of Error, stumble upon Truth.

Let a man contend to the uttermost
For his life's set prize, be it what it will!

The counter our lovers staked was lost
As surely as if it were lawful coin:
And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost

Is—the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
Though the end in sight was a vice, I say.

Once more we have to notice how the poet seems to revel in proving his point from what may with some justice be called a doubtful case. And he deliberately in this instance both expected and anticipated criticism of his choice of subject.

I hear you reproach, "But delay was best,
"For their end was a crime."—Oh, a crime will do
As well, I reply, to serve for a test,

As a virtue golden through and through,
Sufficient to vindicate itself
And prove its worth at a moment's view.

III

Doubtless there is room for difference of judgment on this matter, and doubtless Browning would have been the first to admit the fact. We do not all look at the same things from the same standpoint, and the angle of vision differs with temperament and training. And after all the only question we need really ask here, as elsewhere, is this — does the poet, having chosen his material, really use

it to drive home the particular truth he wishes to teach? Has he in this instance made us ashamed and dissatisfied with slack, procrastinating lives? Has he aided us to light our lamp and gird our loins in readiness for the next strong call of duty? Has he made us cast in our lot more fully with all strong and gallant souls?

> Oh, a crime will do
> As well, I reply, to serve for a test.

This does not necessarily imply that crime and immoral passion are the necessary tests of all life—God forbid! Though that even these very things are tests in many lives who can deny? And the Christian man is the last who can dare to question the facts.

Who was it Who said, speaking to the chief priests and elders of the people, "Verily I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you?"

Who was it Who spake the parable of the Prodigal Son?

Who was it Who told that "his lord commended the unrighteous steward because he had done wisely?"

And what did Christ see that pointed towards hope in these wretched lives, whereas in the self-satisfied Phariseeism of the religionists of the day He saw nothing but despair and hopelessness? Surely it was this, that the complacent lives of the

Priests and Pharisees and Elder Brothers were lives uncleansed by the consuming fires of enthusiasm and whole-hearted striving. They were weak and limp and coldly critical. They knew nothing of the torture of defeated hopes, the heartless battling against adverse circumstances, the agony of overwhelming despair. It might have been the salvation of such lives if the temptation to some hideous crime had suddenly stared them in the face; for even if they had been overcome for a time, the rousing to energy, the coming to grips with open temptation, and the consequent shaking up of all the moral powers would have proved so whole-

some a medicine that the entire vision and significance of life must have been exalted thereafter for ever. Such has been in many men's experience the enlightening power of a great crime. The prodigal son ran riot in a far country, but he returned to the bosom of his father. Saul of Tarsus made havoc of the Church, and his consuming passion for persecution led him to the Damascus road of the opened Heaven. Even the energy of crime may be preferable to the slow suicide of a limp life. Energy and whole-hearted effort have a value of their own and an effect upon character apart from the circumstances of the effort. And even the unrighteous

steward, who was undeniably false to his trust and a traitor to his master's interest, just because he "was resolved what to do," gripped the situation so strongly, laid his plans so boldly, and carried them out with unflagging effort; just for these things was he commended.

Parable and poem stand like the statue and the bust, as warnings against weak wills and procrastinations.

When the Eternal Moments of Life come to us, when strong decisions have to be made that cast the issues for the future days, let us make them whole-heartedly and perform them valiantly, being resolved what to do,

and having the moral courage to do it—only let it be for the defeat of crime and the exaltation of Righteousness.

VIII

THE HEAVENLY VISION

"ABT VOGLER"

That Browning was by instincts and appreciation a true Artist, we have already seen. That he was appealed to, swayed, and inspired by the raptures of the Musician we proceed to show. Indeed, it is probable that among all the many potent influences that were brought to bear upon his life, Music held a supreme place. His troubled soul found rest in it; here his despondent soul saw hope amid a world of baffling antagonisms. In his most sanguine moods of joy and

ultimate victory over all the conflicting powers of darkness and depression, it was Music that gave wings to his most exalted aspirations; he sang himself and played himself into the presence of the Angels and Archangels of God's own Heaven. Music cleansed and purified by its wholesome κάθαρσις, washed away the Earth-stains and then filled with the rapture of high and holy Vision. The cramped soul rose from the chrysalis life of Earth's common experiences, and on the wings of Music soared into the infinitudes of the open Heaven.

I

In *Abt Vogler*, Browning has written most nobly, bringing refreshment to many a weary soul. For in it he shows us that most admirable and necessary blending of the Ideal and the Real that bids us thank God and take courage.

The aged musician has been extemporising upon his organ, the instrument of his invention. And it is worth while to note the poet's choice among musical instruments of the organ, with its numerous keys and stops and swells—like the varied elements of human life. What boundless possibilities they both contain.

What joinings and blendings and effects. What intricate windings and breathless pursuits. What strength and majesty ; what delicate, palpitating sympathy. What giant thunderings, like Nature in her titanic moods ; what gentle, soothing melodies, like the summer sunshine or the cooing of the ring-dove to its mate. What strident antagonisms, what winsome harmonies ; now like a giant in pain, now like the rippling of fairy laughter. Now awful in its despair, like the agonies of lost souls ; now sweet and strong, like the triumph-song of the Redeemed Host. This manifold, composite instrument of strange powers and glorious, rapturous possibilities

—no wonder it appealed to the poet as best suited of all to body forth the hope and despair, the strength and the weakness, the joy and the pain, the defeat and the ultimate victory of humanity.

And as the old man played his organ, gliding on from chord to chord, blunting, sharpening, weaving, twining, fingers following soul caught the Divine impulse, and from the poor, mean, simple things of earth he plunged into the rich harmonies and mellow cadences of heaven. But he stops, and it is gone! A rush of human consciousness has brought him down to earth. And he is dissatisfied. Why can he not call up at will the

spirit-slaves of sound, as Solomon, according to the old Hebrew legend, could command the "armies of angels" and "legions of demons" to build the beauteous palace for the Princess of his love? Under the influence of his soul's flight he had built up a palace of ravishing sounds —but how shortlived it all was; and now it is gone past recall. The Artist with his brush, the Writer with his pen, each had the advantage over him. At least their work stood; it had a permanence above the fleeting moments of his organ-voluntary. Yet he sees, and hope dawns once more within him, theirs is but effect produced from cause, the outcome of

obedience to restricting laws; and so too, probably, was his own playing up to a certain point. But faith gave wings to his soul, and the inspiration of the Divine gave power to his fingers. He became unconscious of Earth and Art and Law, and soaring into the highest heaven, saw God face to face.

But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,
Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo, they are!
And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,
That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.
Consider it well: each tone of our scale in itself is nought;
It is everywhere in the world—loud, soft, and all is said:

Give it to me to use! I mix it with two in my thought:
And, there! Ye have heard and seen: consider and bow the head!

It is not a matter of Art-criticism, but of being lifted up to the lap of the living God. It is the Vision Beautiful manifested to the man whose soul has been cleansed from defilement and exalted through strong hope and rapturous wonderment. "Whether in the body, I know not; or whether out of the body, I know not; God knoweth"; but certain it is that he hath been "caught up into the third Heaven, and heard words which it is not lawful for a man to utter."

And, there! Ye have heard and seen: consider
and bow the head!

So true it is, that all great Art is Worship, the casting down of the crowns of human effort, that that effort may be reconsecrated in the presence of the Almighty.

II

But what of the Palace of Harmony: has it gone for ever? This seems at first thought most probable.

Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I
reared;
Gone! and the good tears start, the praises
that come too slow;
For one is assured at first, one scarce can say
that he feared,
That he even gave it a thought, the gone
thing was to go.
Never to be again!

But it is only stated that the possibility of it may be hurled into the abyss of things abhorrent. Did God create longings and rapture in the human heart only to dash hopes and stifle ambition? Is the open Heaven a mockery, and the Face of God a slayer of all that is high and holy in our poor lives? Are we lifted up to Paradise only that we may be cast out into the void of the Divine displeasure? Is Life a mockery and Death the only reality? Which is destined to hold final sway in the Universe of the All-Father—Imperfection or Perfection, Failure or Victory, Sin or Holiness, Discord or Harmony, God or the Enemy of Souls?

Therefore to whom turn I but to Thee, the ineffable Name?
Builder and Maker, Thou, of houses not made with hands!
What, have fear of change from Thee Who art ever the same?
Doubt that Thy power can fill the heart that Thy power expands?
There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as before;
The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound;
What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more;
On the earth, the broken arcs; in the heaven, the perfect round.

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power,
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.

The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
Enough that He heard it once; we shall hear it by-and-by.

The moments of exalted hopes that come to man when his soul feels out into the serene atmosphere of God's more immediate presence are prophecies of his future development. And all the circumstantial evidence of present unsatisfactoriness cannot mar the Vision nor prevent its ultimate attainment. There is Sin in the world, yet Righteousness shall reign; pain and sorrow and degradation abound, but they are destined

to give place to the joy and exaltation of "the Christ that is to be." Even Failure is but a mark of the limitations of our humanity. But is not humanity "a man who *lives* and *learns* for ever"? And as he *learns* more fully, so shall ever more fully the will of God be done; and the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ.

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered or agonised?
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue thence?
Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should be prized?

Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe:
But God has a few of us whom He whispers in the ear;
The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians know.

III

Men of ideals have been derided for being unpractical. This is as a rule a mistaken criticism; for the exalted and the lowly go ever hand in hand in this life. Without the Vision life would become narrow and self-centred; and without the test and training-ground of common duties the Vision-seer would tend to become a mere Visionary. What Wordsworth

wrote of Milton should be true of the ordinary rather than the extraordinary man—

> Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart.

That is the Vision-seer caught up into the third Heaven.

> And yet thy heart
> The lowliest duties on itself did lay.

That is the Vision-seer coming down to earth, and in the strength of his vision conquering the common-places of life and turning them into stepping-stones to the higher things of the vision's fulfilment.

So with Abt Vogler and all true Musicians who would train themselves to sing the praises of Eternity. As

soon as he has heard the whisper of the Divine voice, sure now the palace of sweet sounds will one day be heard again in even fuller glory, knowing too that discords find their explanation only when resolved into their resultant harmonies, and that while here failure is but the prophecy of future success, he touches earth to work his way through its common duties to the Land of Eternal Harmonies.

Well, it is earth with me; silence resumes her reign:
I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce,
Give me the keys. I feel for the common chord again,
Sliding by semitones, till I sink to the minor,
—yes,

And I blunt it into a ninth, and I stand on alien ground,
Surveying awhile the heights I rolled from into the deep;
Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my resting-place is found,
The C major of this life: so, now, I will try to sleep.

IX

THE COMING OF THE CHRIST

"SAUL"

The religion of Robert Browning has been from time to time subjected to much needless criticism on the part of certain well-meaning people, which has only resulted in revealing the narrow, dogmatic attitude of the critics, and has left absolutely unsullied the character of the poet.

Browning's religion did not consist in the expression of pious opinions. It certainly did not consist in the muttering of party Shibboleths. It had little to do with the subscription

to formal Creeds. But it had everything to do with that most essential element of every honest man's religion — the living of an upright, honest and helpful life. In fact, Religion and Life were to him, as they ought to be to all people, synonymous terms. Character was the only true test of the value of a man's religious principles. A bad or an indifferent religion was one that turned out a bad or an indifferent man, and a good religion was one that turned out a good man. Browning believed that a man always strove to live up to his Creed, only his *real* Creed and his *professed* Creed were not always identical. But no amount of Creed-

reciting could atone for a mean character.

It has been questioned whether Browning could rightly be called a "religious" poet. In one sense probably not. There is very little religion in a good many "religious" poems; but there is a great deal of the very truest religion in the poetry of Robert Browning—the religion of honour and chivalrous courtesy, the religion of tolerance and wide-hearted sympathy, the religion of work and self-sacrifice, the religion of hope and inspiration, the religion of God's own gentlemen. His religion was his life, and the expression of it is found in his poetry which tingles

with life—*his* life, healthy, buoyant, large-hearted, high-principled and indomitably hopeful.

The existence and benevolence of God were not to be accounted for by the occasional confession of a Creed; they were to him the atmosphere of his life. God was, to use Martineau's phrase, "The Besetting God"—a haunting Presence of Joy and Life and Beauty. And the Face of the Christ pierced him through with the great eyes of His majestic condescension and Human pity.

That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows![1]

[1] Epilogue to *Dramatis Personæ*.

That haunting Presence was the source and inspiration of his most rapturous utterances and his sympathy with the poor baffled souls of earth, struggling in their cramped environments; and even in their most forlorn despair he looked on them with the large eyes of the piteous Christ, touched the chord of human sympathy, showed them that even in their degradation they had capabilities for better things, and pointed them from the Slough of Despond of human failure to the Delectable Mountains of God's rich blessing.

And who shall presume to say, even in the interests of the straitest Orthodoxy, that such a man was not

religious? God grant us more of such religion in the world.

I

If, then, the aim of religion is to form noble characters, to encourage charitable judgments, to influence for good oppressed and weary souls, and to fill the world with God, then, indeed, in *Saul* we have pre-eminently a religious poem. Here God is the very breath of the nostrils. He is in His creation in all its moods, and uses the willing and the humble to touch with the electric thrill of sweet humanity and tender sympathy the high and mighty ones in their gloom and melancholy.

It is the well-known scene of David playing before Saul, with its telling, dramatic contrasts between winsome youth and the sad humiliation of angry passions when seated in kingly bosoms.

The proportions of Saul are drawn on a grand scale, and the consuming rage and bitter despair of the gloomy, possessed monarch are tremendous, in keeping. Within the deeply-folded tent he sits, and for three days no one has dared to approach him, so great is the terror of his isolation.

"For out of the black mid-tent's silence, a space of three days,
"Not a sound hath escaped to thy servants, of prayer or of praise,

"To betoken that Saul and the Spirit have
ended their strife,
"And that, faint in his triumph, the monarch
sinks back upon life."

So Abner, the armour-bearer, explains to David, the shepherd-minstrel, as he welcomes the possibility of the king's gloom being dispelled by the music of the cunning player upon the harp. And after kneeling to the God of his fathers the young man entered the royal tent.

At the first I saw nought but the blackness; but
soon I descried
A something more black than the blackness—
the vast, the upright
Main prop which sustains the pavilion: and
slow into sight

Grew a figure against it, gigantic and blackest of all.
Then a sunbeam, that burst thro' the tent-roof, showed Saul.

Then I tuned my harp,—took off the lilies we twine round its chords
Lest they snap 'neath the stress of the noontide—those sunbeams like swords!

First he played the tune he was wont to play as he shepherded his sheep on Bethlehem's plains, when, like Orpheus, he twanged the chords that made the wayward animals docile and dumb before the magic of the music. Then he sang of the quails on the cornland, and the crickets, and "the quick jerboa a-musing outside his sand house." Then he sang the wine-song of the reapers that drew

them together in good fellowship, bidding them "grow one in the sense of this world's life." Then from the loud and joyous wine-song he plunged into the deep, gloomy melody of the funeral dirge, of the snapping of the silver cord, the breaking of the golden bowl, and man going to his long home. Then once more he surged out of the midnight gloom into the meridian of bright hopes, and sang aloud the marriage chant of the fair maiden and the strong man linked eternally in the bands of love. Then he sang the chorus of the white-robed Levites swaying towards the Altar of the Most Holy; and here, in the awful presence of his

God he halted, borne down by the grandeur of his conjured imaginings.

And I paused, held my breath in such silence,
and listened apart;
And the tent shook, for mighty Saul shuddered:
and sparkles 'gan dart
From the jewels that woke in his turban, at once
with a start,
All its lordly male-sapphires, and rubies cour-
ageous at heart.
So the head: but the body still moved not, still
hung there erect.
And I bent once more to my playing, pursued it
unchecked.

II

The Vision of God has given new wings to his soul's flight, new power to the brilliance of his touch, new force to the appealing power of his music. And the sheer majesty of his

young healthy life bursts forth now in an overwhelming ecstasy—

"Oh, The wild joys of living! The leaping
from rock up to rock,
"The strong rending of boughs from the fir-
tree, the cool silver shock
"Of the plunge in a pool's living water, the hunt
of the bear,
"And the sultriness showing the lion is couched
in his lair.

"How good is man's life, the mere living! how
fit to employ
"All the heart and the soul and the senses, for
ever in joy!"

His appeal now is to things intense in their *human* significance, the vitality and energy of man's common life. From the joys of the lower orders of the animal creation, from man's power of appeal to and sym-

pathy with them he passes to the more sacred touch of man's dealings with man, the affinity of soul to soul. And then God and God's will are held up for reverence as the explaining and sanctifying principle of all healthy activity. The love of father, mother, brother, friend—what are they but sacraments of the all-penetrating Love of God? And though at times in the Chant of Life "they sing through their tears," it is nevertheless "in strong triumph." And what is their common verdict?

> "I have lived, seen God's hand thro' a lifetime, and all was for best."

Such, goes on the singer, was the hopefulness in which the king's youth

had been nurtured, played upon by the subtle influences of his friends, till, grown head and shoulders above his fellows in bodily stature, he, the man of the strong right arm who had led on his fellows against their country's foes, had with one acclaim and with Jehovah's sanction been proclaimed "King Saul!"

The words strongly sung as marking the climax of a strong effort, and the solemn pause that issued, brought at last some awakening response from the moody monarch.

> One long shudder thrilled
> All the tent till the very air tingled, then sank and was stilled
> At the King's self left standing before me, released and aware.

The spell of sympathy had begun to work ; for the human soul is strong to respond to confidence and trust. Sin and selfishness had broken the natural bonds that had linked Saul to the rest of God's creatures. And the sweet singer had, in the spontaneous wisdom of his healthy nature, built up *from below* the broken citadel of natural relationships. The sheep, the quails, the crickets, the " quick jerboa " were all links in the chain of Nature's great scheme of existence that led upwards to the higher life of human relationships ; all are once more welded together under the charm of David's harp and voice ; and in all, and through all, and above all,

the will of God was seen to be present to watch and keep, to heal diseases and to bind up broken hearts.

But then, what of that humiliating fall into the mire of selfish disobedience? Even in that sad past that seemed to Saul so worthless and so dead, there was seen by the hopeful eye of the young singer the germ of a higher and more fruitful service. The prodigal who wandered into the company of the harlots and the swine was still his father's son; and the mighty soldier in the melancholy of his fallen life was still David's King. And in still hailing him as his King the singer was able to call forth the slumbering best within him,

which was not "dead" but only "sleeping."

"Yea, my King,"
I began—"thou dost well in rejecting mere comforts that spring
"From the mere mortal life held in common by man and by brute:
"In our flesh grows the branch of this life, in our soul it bears fruit."

The crushed grape yields the richest wine, and the tried life often bears the divinest fruit. The past was not all evil; good there was in those early days of loyal obedience and willing self-sacrifice. And Goodness has an eternal value. It may be baffled by adverse circumstances or a weak will — but only for a time. The victory is for him who, though he fall,

nevertheless rises again and pushes onwards, even if it be with halting step and bleeding feet.

"Each deed thou hast done
"Dies, revives, goes to work in the world; until e'en as the sun
"Looking down on the earth, though clouds spoil him, though tempests efface,
"Can find nothing his own deed produced not, must everywhere trace
"The results of his past summer-prime,—so, each ray of thy will,
"Every flash of thy passion and prowess, long over, shall thrill
"Thy whole people, the countless, with ardour, till they too give forth
"A like cheer to their sons, who in turn fill the South and the North
"With the radiance thy deed was the germ of."

And David's confidence in Saul produced Saul's confidence in himself. Appealed to as a King he re-

sponded by acting as a King. The gloom of his despair yielded, and brightness came over him as "The dawn struggling with night on his shoulder." He had got at death-grips with the oppressing power of evil, and as Browning says in *Bishop Blougram's Apology*—

> When the fight begins within himself,
> A man's worth something. God stoops o'er his head,
> Satan looks up between his feet—both tug—
> He's left, himself, i' the middle: the soul wakes
> And grows.

So had the soul of King Saul risen from the dread conflict into newness of life.

> I looked up to know
> If the best I could do had brought solace: he spoke not, but slow

Lifted up the hand slack at his side, till he laid
it with care
Soft and grave, but in mild settled will, on my
brow: thro' my hair
The large fingers were pushed, and he bent back
my head, with kind power—
All my face back, intent to peruse it, as men do
a flower.
Thus held he me there with his great eyes that
scrutinized mine—
And oh, all my heart how it loved him!

III

Now that the King is fully aroused, his faculties returned, his soul humbled, his hopes raised, the poet pours out his very soul in the intensity of his joy.

"I spoke as I saw:
I report, as a man may of God's work—all's
Love, yet all's Law!"

God, he feels, at once permeates

and transcends His universe. He is to be seen in star and stone and flesh and clod ; though humility and teachableness are needed for their discernment—" that stoop of the soul which in bending upraises it too." The yielding to the Divine Law is needed to bring us to the Divine Love—" the submission of man's nothing-perfect to God's all-complete." And having seen so far, will Saul hesitate to launch out into the illimitable future with glowing hope and patient trust ?

" What, my soul ? See thus far and no farther ?
when doors great and small,
" Nine-and-ninety flew ope at our touch, should
the hundredth appal ?
" In the least things have faith, yet distrust in
the greatest of all ? "

Shall God not complete what He has begun? Shall man be piteous still, but God be without mercy? Shall "the Creature surpass the Creator"? And if in some unwary moment Saul again stumble into the crooked ways of selfishness and sin, shall He not

"Interpose at the difficult minute, snatch Saul the mistake,
"Saul, the failure, the ruin he seems now,—and bid him awake
"From the dream, the probation, the prelude, to find himself set
"Clear and safe in new light and new life,—a new harmony yet
"To be run, and continued, and ended — who knows?—or endure!
"The man taught enough, by life's dream, of the rest to make sure;

"By the pain-throb, triumphantly winning intensified bliss,
"And the next world's reward and repose, by the struggle in this."

For after all life is not to be judged at any moment by what it *is*, but by what it *is becoming*.

"What stops my despair?
"This;—'tis not what man Does which exalts him, but what man Would do!"

And as the young man looks on the kingly countenance still wet with the sweat-drops of the great struggle, he knows that he could and would lay down his life that Saul might be saved. And feeling that, a mighty thought comes surging over his young soul. If he, the insignificant singer, would suffer for him he loves, would

not the Great God with His unutterable love for all His wayward, sinning creatures likewise be prepared to suffer ?

"Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst Thou—so wilt Thou!"

And the vision of the Man of Sorrows Who should give His life a ransom for many grows large upon his raptured gaze. Yes! it *may* be; and, because it *may*, it *must* be. His poor, human sympathy had touched the degraded life of sin and quickened it into a renewed activity for Righteousness. Man's hand had been laid on man's heart, and its feverish beating had been stilled. The response was from the human to

the human. And the Almighty God shall enter afresh His universe when, in the fulness of the times, He shall empty Himself, and take upon Him the form of a servant and be made in the likeness of Man. "And a *Man* shall be as a hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land."

It is a brilliant conception. The pure in heart it is who "see God." And to the pure, unsullied soul of the young shepherd, while yet his light was unmingled with the moral darkness that afterwards overtook him, the Vision of the Christ may indeed

have come—the only solution of the enigmas of life, the only explanation of its mysteries, the only balm for its many grievous woes.

"Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh, that I seek
"In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be
"A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
"Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever: a Hand like this hand
"Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the Christ stand!"

It was a conception of amazing and daring boldness; and after its utterance David plunged into the darkness of the night, and somehow, he knew not how exactly, found his way home. The utterance of the tremendous

thought had startled the Powers of Earth and Heaven and Hell into a strange and unwonted activity.

> The whole earth was awakened, hell loosed with her crews;
> And the stars of night beat with emotion, and tingled and shot
> Out in fire the strong pain of pent knowledge: but I fainted not,
> For the Hand still impelled me at once and supported.

He had seen from afar the Vision of the Incarnation, which must come as the most perfect and humanly intelligible evidence of the Father's love.

Saul was but a type of the strong man of Earth beaten down by the opposing forces that oppress

humanity, possessed by the evil demon of selfishness and disobedience, snared from the path of rectitude by the subtle insinuations of pride and success.

David was the sweet-voiced singer who, touching poor wounded souls with the finger of truly human compassion and sympathy, awakening with the strong hopefulness of youth the slumbering good within them, points them onward from human weaknesses to the Divine Love—onward to the great Perfection, the Man Christ Jesus.

X

FAITH AND SIGHT

"A DEATH IN THE DESERT"

THE poem *A Death in the Desert* calls to be estimated from a double standpoint. It is important from the standpoint of *form*; it is even more important from the standpoint of *matter*. It is at once an evidence of Browning's power and craftsmanship as a poet, and also a splendid Apologia of his vigorous and manly faith.

It tells the story of the death of the beloved apostle Saint John, who had lived to an advanced age in an era of persecution and intense trial.

The circumstances are dramatic and realistic, as Browning conceives them; the historical setting being imaginative rather than critically accurate. Yet the poet has caught the spirit of the situation so admirably that we feel no incongruities of incident, no straining for effect. All seems so entirely natural and probable that we feel it may have been even as the poet puts it.

Browning rarely wrote a poem in so clear a sunshine, with such consummate simplicity, and at the same time with such unflinching energy and lofty idealism. The lowly and the exalted, the simple and the profound, are seldom to be met with in

a single poem as we find them linked together in *A Death in the Desert.* That humility is the gateway to an exalted vision, that weakness is a condition for the acquisition of strength, that the truly human is the medium of the truly divine—this is laid clearly before us; and strength and hope dawn afresh as we gaze at the wonder of it.

I

There is an unspeakable loneliness about the aged John as he lives on through the weary years of his earthly pilgrimage. Peter and James and the other members of the apostolic band have passed through the door

of martyrdom from the woes of earth to the joys of heaven. They have nobly witnessed, each in his several way, to the truth, have earned the victor's golden crown, and passed into the Presence Chamber of the Great King. John only is left, and the sands of his life are fast running out. Persecution with redoubled fury is abroad, and the dying man has been carried by a small yet faithful band of followers to a desert cave, where he has lain for many days waiting the home call, nearing the "waking point of crowning life." Fearing the end might come before they were aware, and that they might "lose the last of what might

happen on his face," they carried him from the deep recesses of the cave into the half-light of its "mid-most grotto," and laid him gently down, "bedded on a camel-skin," and gazed wistfully at the face they loved so well.

I at the head, and Xanthus at the feet,
With Valens and the Boy, had lifted him,
And brought him from the chamber in the depths,
And laid him in the light where we might see:
For certain smiles began about his mouth,
And his lids moved, presageful of the end.

Beyond, and half-way up the mouth o' the cave,
The Bactrian convert, having his desire,
Kept watch, and made pretence to graze a goat
That gave us milk, on rags of various herb,
Plantain and quitch, the rocks' shade keeps alive:
So that if any thief or soldier passed,

(Because the persecution was aware)
Yielding the goat up promptly with his life,
Such man might pass on, joyful at a prize,
Nor care to pry into the cool o' the cave.
Outside was all noon and the burning blue.

The old man lies as in a trance, unconscious of their presence; or is he but sleeping the child-like sleep of tired and weary nature, dreaming of the opened heaven of Patmos, and of One like unto the Son of Man, Whose voice was as the sound of many waters, Whose countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength? Perhaps he had a parting word for them, the struggling remnant of the faith; and would he pass with the secret of holy mysteries on his lips, yet speak them not?

"Here is wine," answered Xanthus,—dropped a drop;
I stooped and placed the lap of cloth aright,
Then chafed his right hand, and the Boy his left:
But Valens had bethought him, and produced
And broke a ball of nard, and made perfume.
Only, he did—not so much wake, as—turn
And smile a little, as a sleeper does
If any dear one call him, touch his face—
And smiles and loves, but will not be disturbed.
Then Xanthus said a prayer, but still he slept.

Then the Boy sprang up from his knees, and ran,
Stung by the splendour of a sudden thought,
And fetched the seventh plate of graven lead
Out of the secret chamber, found a place,
Pressing with finger on the deeper dints,
And spoke, as 'twere *His* mouth proclaiming first
"I am the Resurrection and the Life."

Whereat he opened his eyes wide at once,
And sat up of himself, and looked at us;
And thenceforth nobody pronounced a word:
Only, outside, the Bactrian cried his cry

Like the lone desert-bird that wears the ruff,
As signal we were safe, from time to time.

II

The little company of watchers only numbered five, but it is noticeable that one of them is a *boy*. Age and youth here meet; the tempered wisdom of long years and the burning enthusiasm of budding manhood join; and the torch of life is passed on from generation to generation. One test of a man's worth is his influence upon youth; and the presence of the Boy in the face of fierce persecution and the very gravest danger is an evidence of the strength of the personality of the dying hero.

Wisdom and Enthusiasm are the needed inspirations of life—Wisdom that is fired by Enthusiasm; Enthusiasm that is tempered and chastened by Wisdom. And the presence of the Boy assures us that the faith of Saint John was not to die, but as a Fiery Cross to be sent forth to claim the allegiance of the world.

And there is another test of a strong personality—its influence upon the untutored mind that cannot be won by logic, but may be drawn by the lure of a great affection. So the presence of the "Bactrian convert" is at once natural and suggestive.

The Bactrian was but a wild childish man,
And could not write nor speak, but only loved.

Love, which is the master passion of Life, the "Greatest thing in the world."

"I am the Resurrection and the Life." This was the potent spell that roused the old man from his trance-like sleep.

And they were right. He had a message for them as a last rich legacy; a revelation of great and glorious hope illumined by "the light that never was on sea or land." And the chief interest of the whole poem centres in the fact that this revelation embodies the fundamentals of a strong man's faith — the faith of Robert Browning.

"Sun-treader," said Browning,

apostrophising Shelley in *Pauline*, his first published poem,

> "Sun-treader, I believe in God, and Truth,
> And Love."

And his life was the vindication of his faith. Nothing ever broke the rapture of it; not the awful ghastliness of sin; not the sickening horror of moral corruption; not the hollow hypocrisies of fawning sycophants; not the wail of despair that rose to heaven from broken lives. He saw the hideousness of crime; he felt the press of the myriad-headed crowd of human tempters; he knew the devil, whose name was "Legion." Yet he believed in God, and Truth, and Love. He believed that God

could save, Truth could guide, Love could hold.

And what is that I hunger for but God?

My God, my God, let me for once look on Thee
As though nought else existed, we alone!
And as Creation crumbles, my soul's spark
Expands till I can say,—Even from myself
I need Thee and I feel Thee, and I love Thee.
I do not plead my rapture in Thy works
For love of Thee, nor that I feel as one
Who cannot die: but there is that in me
Which turns to Thee, which loves or which should love.

III

The same truth had to be learned by Paracelsus. Love must be an integral part of all true living. The ambition that wrought for Power apart from Love was choked in the realisation of its own unsatisfying

ends. Even the poor Aprile, with his Poet's heart, knew more of the riddle of Life than the proud philosopher who spurned the possession of Love as a vain and a worthless thing. And in the end the proud man had to stoop low, and, as a little child, learn the alphabet of Love.

> Such ever was Love's way; to rise it stoops.

The more prosaic Festus, inasmuch as he had not despised the loves of earth, had caught the vision of the Love of heaven.

> God! Thou art Love! I build my faith on that!
>
> . . . . . .
>
> So doth Thy right hand guide us through the world
> Wherein we stumble.

But the proud man *did* stoop, as Browning conceived it, and at the eleventh hour entered the vineyard of the Lord of Love, to labour for the reward of Eternity. So that the darkness held for him now no terror; in death his foot was on "The threshold of boundless life."

If I stoop
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast; its splendour, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom: I shall emerge one day.

The same strong faith spoke from the lips of David and of Rabbi ben Ezra—a faith that will not be daunted by danger, nor turned aside by low ideals.

Sun-treader, I believe in God, and Truth,
And Love.

To return to the poem we are discussing. The apostle is now fully aroused, and the flash-light of his mind sweeps over the experiences that are Past, brightens the Present issues of the Faith, and sends its piercing gleams into the yet unfolded Future. He thinks of the Christ, of Peter and James, and the wonders of the Apocalyptic Vision. He strengthens the zeal of his immediate followers, and he boldly anticipates the problems of future ages.

How will it be when none more saith
"I saw"?

He considers his own mission to

preach and write. It seemed all so simple, so natural, so spontaneous. The Divine challenge, the human response, the strong and buoyant message—" and men believed."

> I wrote, and men believed.
> Then, for my time grew brief, no message more,
> No call to write again, I found a way,
> And, reasoning from my knowledge, merely taught
> Men should, for love's sake, in love's strength believe.

And when the truth was challenged by the Antichrists who were " already in the world,"

> For men said, " It is getting long ago:
> " Where is the promise of His coming?"

he lived again through the old familiar

scenes, seeing them now through the mists of many years, but

Guarded and guided still to see and speak;

—scenes and words that in a new age assumed a new significance;

And named them in the Gospel I have writ.

Browning does not stop to ask if St. John really wrote the Fourth Gospel. In his determined fashion he assumed the fact. Why should he doubt it? Was not St. John the Apostle of Love? Is not his Gospel a gospel of Love? Was not his Lord the Lord of Love? Does not the consideration of it inspire Love? And the continuity of Love

has never been broken. It not only *was* but *is*, and what is true of Love is true of God; for "God *is* Love."

To me, that story—ay, that Life and Death
Of which I wrote "it was"—to me, it is;
—Is, here and now: I apprehend nought else.
Is not God now i' the world His power first made?
Is not His love at issue still with sin,
Visibly when a wrong is done on earth?
Love, wrong, and pain, what see I else around?
Yea, and the Resurrection and Uprise
To the right hand of the Throne—what is it beside,
When such truth, breaking bounds, o'erfloods my soul,
And, as I saw the sin and death, even so
See I the need yet transiency of both,
The good and glory consummated thence?
I saw the power; I see the Love, once weak,
Resume the power: and in this word "I see,"

Lo, there is recognized the Spirit of both
That moving o'er the spirit of man, unblinds
His eye, and bids him look.

And as the old man rouses himself to a supreme effort, while yet there is time, he brings himself to face the problems of the Present, which, indeed, are akin to those of preceding generations, and the exaltation of Love, he is assured, will answer the needs of all life.

For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear,—believe the aged friend,—
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;
And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
Such prize despite the envy of the world,
And, having gained truth, keep truth: that is all.

IV

But questioners and unbelievers are found in all ages, and Browning puts into the lips of St. John words of wisdom for the materialistic critics of the first and second centuries; which words, there is little doubt, were intended to bear weight against the arguments of their materialistic brethren of the nineteenth.

> How the soul learns diversely from the flesh!
> The body sprang
> At once to the height, and stayed: but the soul,—no!

The body learns its functions at a bound, but the education of mind and soul is long and tedious. Man's

heritage is not so much Truth, as the quest of Truth—the privilege of search, the fascination of noble effort. Life is a Knight-errantry, chivalrous and adventurous, a stepping out into the dread unknown, a quest of Holy things.

And each age may be noble, as each age may be base.

Sigh ye, "It had been easier once than now?"
To give you answer I am left alive;
Look at me who was present from the first!
Ye know what things I saw; then came a test,
My first, befitting me who so had seen:
"Forsake the Christ thou sawest transfigured, Him
"Who trod the sea and brought the dead to life?
"What would wring this from Thee!"—ye laugh and ask,

What wrung it? Even a torchlight and a noise,
The sudden Roman faces, violent hands,
And fear of what the Jews might do! Just that,
And it is written, "I forsook and fled:"
There was my trial, and it ended thus.

So has each life its own Achilles' heel of vulnerable flesh; to each soul comes the crisis of acute trial under which the boldest may fail.

Ay, but my soul had gained its truth, could grow.

The humiliation of failure often acts as the bitter tears of a strong man, that cleanse and clear the choked-up channels of feeling, and soften the parched ground of the heart that is hard because love is not.

The failure of Saint John may have

deepened even *his* sympathies and strengthened even *his* appeal.

Another year or two,—what little child,
What tender woman that had seen no least
Of all my sights, but barely heard them told,
Who did not clasp the cross with a light laugh,
Or wrap the burning robe round, thanking
God?

Each generation has its own peculiar temptations, but the strength of one age helps the faith of its successors. For even by defeat and failure the soul may gather strength and approximate to truth, and grow. And its newborn energies roll onward down the ages to strengthen weak souls and to intensify the rapture of the spiritual vision.

V

But what of the doubts of those future ages ?

I see you stand conversing, each new face,
Either in fields, of yellow summer eves,
On islets yet unnamed amid the sea;
Or pace for shelter 'neath a portico
Out of the crowd in some enormous town
Where now the lark sings in a solitude;
Or muse upon blank heaps of stone and sand
Idly conjectured to be Ephesus:
And no one asks his fellow any more
"Where is the promise of His coming?" but
"Was He revealed in any of His lives,
"As Power, as Love, as Influencing Soul?"

This last question of the critic must have appealed strongly to Browning's practical and level-headed judgment. And in his own day the answer to it was becoming more and

more destined to prove the determining factor in estimating the worth of the Gospel story. To Browning the question contained its own solution—the one strong argument for the face of God, and of the Love of God. Power, Love, and Influencing Soul he saw unspeakably evident in the lives of men, even amid the squalor and the commonplaces of earth. And whence sprang they but from Him Who is the Lord of Power, and Love, and Soul? He argues from the human to the Divine; from man back and up to God: and in the unsatisfied longings of men he sees the prophecies of a future glory. What man longs to be, he shall

become. What he hungers for, he shall have. The desire for the best makes that best become from henceforth a possibility.

As One, greater than Browning, has said—"Blessed are they that do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."

That criticism contains its own and its only satisfying answer. It is just because there are good men that there must be a good God. And the existence of a good God makes the existence of good men possible.

What is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fulness of the days?

But the critic may rejoin, in effect, that this is too good to be true.

This, says the Apostle, is a gratuitous rejection of the gifts of life, a scorning of the means provided for existence, a voluntary starvation in the midst of plenty, a death from surfeit.

For I say, this is death and the sole death,
When a man's loss comes to him from his gain,
Darkness from light, from knowledge ignorance,
And lack of love from love made manifest;
A lamp's death when, replete with oil, it chokes;
A stomach's when, surcharged with food, it starves.

God has ever given to man in all ages sufficient of help that is needed for his advance. And the helps of one age are not necessarily those of the next.

I fed the babe whether it would or no:
I bid the boy or feed himself or starve.

Man is made to grow. Growth is life: stagnation is death.

It is just here that the reasonableness of miracle enters in the Apostle's (*i.e.* Browning's) judgment. The possibility or the actuality of miracle he never stops to question.

I say, that miracle was duly wrought
When, save for it, no faith was possible,
Whether a change were wrought i' the shows o' the world,
Whether the change came from our minds which see
Of shows o' the world so much as and no more
Than God wills for His purpose, — (what do I
See now, suppose you, there where you see rock

Round us?)—I know not; such was the effect,
So faith grew, making void more miracles
Because too much: They would compel, not help.

God is ever in His world, seeking to open blind eyes and guide the wandering feet; and that man is wise who accepts the circumstances created by a loving God, and turns to account the help God gives for their accomplishment.

And—The just shall live by *Faith*.

But another type of critic may in the after ages be met with. Granted, he may say, there is truth scattered up and down the Gospel narratives. Why is it so fragmentary and relative? Why does God not speak *plainly* to His creatures, telling them

the *whole* truth, keeping *nothing* back ?

I answer, have ye yet to argue out
The very primal thesis, plainest law,
—Man is not God but hath God's end to serve,
A master to obey, a course to take,
Somewhat to cast off, somewhat to become?
Grant this, then man must pass from old to new,
From vain to real, from mistake to fact,
From what once seemed good, to what now proves best.
How could man have progression otherwise?

VI

This is the kernel of Browning's teaching, this continuity of Life through Time and Eternity, that is linked together by weakness and failure, yet glorified by the perfect

hope of the perfect day that lies lost in the vista of Eternity; lost in light, not in darkness. Life, for man, is an ever-intensifying approximation to the perfection of his nature, a realisation by slow degrees of the entire possibilities of his God-given powers. And the failures of the present are more than compensated for by the sustaining vision of the boundless possibilities of the future.

Man knows partly but conceives beside,
Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact,
And in this striving, this converting air
Into a solid he may grasp and use,
Finds progress, man's distinctive mark alone,
Not God's, and not the beasts'; God is, they are,
Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.

And again :—

Man, therefore, thus conditioned, must expect
He could not, what he knows now, know at
first;
What he considers that he knows to-day,
Come but to-morrow, he will find misknown;
Getting increase of knowledge, since he learns
Because he lives, which is to be a man,
Set to instruct himself by his past self:
First, like the brute, obliged by facts to learn,
Next, as man may, obliged by his own mind,
Bent, habit, nature, knowledge turned to law.
God's gift was that man should conceive of truth
And yearn to gain it, catching at mistake,
As midway help till he reach fact indeed.

So is the critic answered.

Man learns slowly, because he learns for Eternity; and conflict, and agony, and defeat and humiliation are part of the price he has to pay in the pursuit of that which is perfect.

Truth is vouchsafed to him only as he is able to bear it and turn it to account. And, once more, the just shall live by Faith.

The sculptor sees his ideal in a rude heap of clay. And through all the stages of his plastic art he realises that the ideal has not yet been reached, but that it is growing slowly into shape. Stopping at any stage of his work, he might be excused for crying—

> I see no face,
> No breast, no feet i' the ineffectual clay.

But the vision was in his mind; it enthused his soul; it fired his imagination; it nerved his clever fingers. And what at any previous stage

might have been dubbed "Falsehood," was but a necessary process in the evolution of "Truth."

Hence he

Enjoyed the falsehood, touched it on to truth.

To teach such truths as these, to lend to struggles in the world's strife a helping hand, the Apostle is ready "to tarry a new hundred years."

But he was dead: 'twas about noon, the day
Somewhat declining: we five buried him
That eve, and then, dividing, went five ways,
And I, disguised, returned to Ephesus.

By this, the cave's mouth must be filled with sand.
Valens is lost, I know not of his trace;
The Bactrian was but a wild childish man,
And could not write nor speak, but only loved:
So, lest the memory of this go quite,
Seeing that I to-morrow fight the beasts,

I tell the same to Phœbas, whom believe!
For many look again to find that face,
Beloved John's, to whom I ministered,
Somewhere in life about the world; they err:
Either mistaking what was darkly spoke
At ending of his book, as he relates,
Or misconceiving somewhat of this speech
Scattered from mouth to mouth as I suppose.
Believe ye will not see him any more
About the world with his divine regard!
For all was as I say, and now the man
Lies as he lay once, breast to breast with God.

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